



TO HELL WITH BANDANNAS

Frances Williams

Interviewed by Karen Anne Mason and Richard Cándida Smith

Completed under the auspices
of the
Oral History Program
University of California

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CONTENTS

Biographical Summary.....	viii
Interview History.....	xiii
TAPE NUMBER: I, Side One (March 11, 1992).....	1

Family background--Williams's family moves to Cleveland--Mother, Elizabeth Nelson Williams, and stepfather, Benjamin Williams--Attends the local Methodist and Episcopal churches--Athletic interests--Begins working at Karamu House--Recruits African Americans to the Democratic Party--Works with the Future Outlook League to train African Americans in business skills--The Gilpin Players write and produce theater for children--The development of Karamu House as a venue for the works of African American playwrights.

TAPE NUMBER: I, Side Two (March 11, 1992).....	26
--	----

Plays produced at Karamu House--Performs in *Scarlet Sister Mary*--A. Philip Randolph--Cyril Briggs--Disagrees with Paul Robeson's decision to appear in *Saunders of the River*--Experiences racism as a young girl--Studies Marxism-Leninism--Promotes African American trade unions--Decides to move to the Soviet Union.

TAPE NUMBER: II, Side One (March 25, 1992).....	47
---	----

Russell W. and Rowena Jelliffe establish Karamu House--Karamu House's physical facilities--Protests surrounding the Cleveland performance of Sean O'Casey's *The Plough and the Stars*--Children's theater productions at Karamu House--Marian Bonsteel--Socializes with Langston Hughes--Well-known African Americans who visited Karamu House--Jasper Deeter's Hedgerow Theatre--Plays Williams appeared in at Karamu House--Finding plays with roles for African Americans.

TAPE NUMBER: II, Side Two (March 25, 1992).....	68
---	----

Attracting an audience to Karamu House--Julius Bledsoe--Wallace Thurman--Creating the costumes,

sets, and music for Karamu's productions--Dealing with African American parts written in dialect--Limited training available for African American actors in the United States--Bertolt Brecht and the Berliner Ensemble--Zora Neale Hurston and Langston Hughes--Williams's lack of exposure to other African American theater groups in the twenties and thirties--Pearl Mitchell--Decides to leave Karamu House to go to the Soviet Union--Creates a fathers club to help unemployed men during the Depression.

TAPE NUMBER: III, Side One (April 1, 1992).....94

More on the lack of training for African American actors in the United States--Meets Friedrich August Wolf--Move to the Soviet Union--Lives with Lloyd and Vera Patterson in Leningrad--Interaction between Russians and African Americans in the Soviet Union--Living and traveling in the Soviet Union--Speaks to a group of Soviet workers--Spends time in the hospital recovering from an infection.

TAPE NUMBER: III, Side Two (April 1, 1992).....116

Productions at the Vakhtangov Theatre and the Meyerhold Theatre--African Americans who traveled to the Soviet Union--Maxim Gorky--Williams is propositioned by a Russian army captain--Vsevolod Meyerhold's and Konstantin Stanislavsky's contrasting acting methods--Wilhelmina Burroughs and her family--Lloyd Patterson lectures on the Scottsboro boys throughout the Soviet Union--Living conditions in the Soviet Union--Williams spends six months in Finland awaiting renewal of her visa.

TAPE NUMBER: IV, Side One (April 29, 1992).....139

The Jelliffes' failure to support professional training for Karamu House actors--The question of the authorship of "Mule Bone: A Comedy of Negro Life"--Embarks on a trip to Mexico with Rotha Calhoun--Interactions with whites in the Ozark Mountains--Williams and Calhoun stay in San Antonio--Difficulties crossing the U.S.-Mexican border--Becomes acquainted with an African American chef in Mexico--Meets with Adam Clayton

Powell Jr. in an attempt to desegregate New York theaters--Williams is refused service in a Washington, D.C., restaurant.

TAPE NUMBER: IV, Side Two (April 29, 1992).....163

Tours with theater groups in the South--More on racial discrimination in restaurants--Performs in *You Can't Take It with You*--Develops acting skills in summer stock companies--Appears with William C. Warfield in the 1951 film production of *Show Boat*--Appears in Oscar Micheaux's film *Lying Lips*--Plays produced through the Federal Theatre Project that included African Americans--Using blocking and casting to alter the emphasis in a production of *The Little Foxes*--Recreating roles that typecast African Americans.

TAPE NUMBER: V, Side One (May 13, 1992).....185

Organizes a summer camp under the auspices of the Harlem Boys Club Theatre--Works with Noble Sissle to produce a coast-to-coast radio program for the United States War Department--World War II's impact on African Americans--A. Philip Randolph's effectiveness in championing civil rights--Campaigns for Fred O'Neal to become the first black president of Actors Equity Association--The Negro Actors Guild--Geraldyn Dismond--Actors Equity's reaction to Asian American actors' attempt to found their own theater.

TAPE NUMBER: V, Side Two (May 13, 1992).....207

Working with Asian American actors--Moves to Los Angeles to be with husband, William Anthony Hill--Hill's work as a ceramicist--Williams takes over a shoe-shine business--The African American film community in Los Angeles--Refuses to accept acting roles that stereotype African Americans.

TAPE NUMBER: VI, Side One (May 27, 1992).....221

Working with Oscar Micheaux on *Lying Lips*--African Americans's involvement in the production of the television series *Frank's Place*--Williams protests an episode of *Frank's Place*--*Frank's Place* is canceled despite its popularity--Accepts a role in Warner Bros. Pictures's *Three Secrets*--

Problems on the set of *Three Secrets*--Hired for a role in the film *Magnificent Doll*.

TAPE NUMBER: VI, Side Two (May 27, 1992).....245

David Niven--The filming of *Magnificent Doll*--Racism on the set--Opportunities for African American actors remain limited after World War II--Fighting discrimination against dancers through the Screen Actors Guild--Williams's thoughts on roles she has played--Racism in the film industry and in Williams's day-to-day life in Los Angeles--The Hollywood blacklist--African Americans who were involved in film production in the forties and fifties.

TAPE NUMBER: VII, Side One (February 24, 1993).....268

Meets Jacob Lawrence in New York City--Organizes an exhibition of Lawrence's work in Los Angeles--Countee Cullen--John Howard Lawson--More on Jacob Lawrence--Works with the Negro Art Theatre--Leo Branton--Involvement in the Actors Lab--Replaces Claudia McNeil in the play *A Raisin in the Sun*--Claudia McNeil's personality.

TAPE NUMBER: VII, Side Two (February 24, 1993).....290

More on Claudia McNeil--Works with Lloyd Richards--Is befriended by two fans while performing in *A Raisin in the Sun*--Meets Bertolt Brecht at the Actors Lab--Producing *Salt of the Earth*--Runs for the California State Assembly in the forties--Starts the Frances Williams Corner Theatre--Establishing the Inner City Cultural Center--Organizes interviews for actors for the Inner City Cultural Center--Supervises wardrobe at the Inner City Cultural Center.

TAPE NUMBER: VIII, Side One (February 24, 1993).....314

More on establishing the Inner City Cultural Center--Meeting W. E. B. DuBois--DuBois and his wife, Shirley Graham DuBois--The Frances Williams Corner Theatre's collaboration with Local 47 of the American Federation of Musicians--Williams's plans to publish an autobiography.

Index.....324

BIOGRAPHICAL SUMMARY

PERSONAL HISTORY:

Born: September 17, 1905, East Orange, New Jersey.

Spouse: George Ferguson; William Anthony Hill, married 1939.

CAREER HISTORY:

Acting:

Theater:

Abe Lincoln, Los Angeles.

Amen Corner, Los Angeles.

The Little Foxes, on tour.

The Male Animal, Los Angeles, on tour.

A Raisin in the Sun, Broadway, on tour.

Scarlet Sister Mary, on tour.

The Taming of the Shrew, Los Angeles.

You Can't Take It with You, Broadway, on tour.

Film:

Crosscreek

The Glove

The Jerk

Lying Lips

Magnificent Doll

Man of a Thousand Faces

Piece of the Action

Reckless Moment
Rented Lips
The River Niger
Show Boat
Sparkle
Stone Killers
Three Secrets
Together Brothers
Toolbox Murders
Uncle Joe Shannon
With Just a Little Trust

Radio:

Lux Theatre of the Air

Television Series:

Amen
Frank's Place
General Hospital
Gibbsville
Helltown
Hill Street Blues
Little House on the Prairie
Palmerstown, U.S.A.
Policy Story
The Waltons

The White Shadow

Movies for Television:

Ambush Murders

A Dream For Christmas

King

Sisters

A Woman Called Moses

Commercials:

Amtrak

Commonwealth Edison

Foster Farms

Producing and directing:

Film:

Salt of the Earth, assistant director and production staff member, 1954.

Television:

Integration LA, University of Chicago, writer and director.

Magic Carpet to the Fine Arts, writer and director.

These Are Americans Too, National Broadcasting Company, Chet Huntley Productions, writer and director.

Uptown, Channel 13, Los Angeles, coproducer and director.

Radio:

First coast-to-coast radio show from WMCA, New York, writer and director.

AFFILIATIONS:

Professional:

Actors Equity, West Coast advisory committee; minority committee.

Actors Lab, Los Angeles, executive board.

American Federation of Television and Radio Artists.

American Guild of Variety Artists, executive board.

Circle Theatre in the Round, Los Angeles, executive board.

Cosmo Theatre, executive board.

Harlem Boys Club Theatre, New York, director of drama.

National Council of Colored Women, Ohio, drama head.

Negro Actors Guild, cofounder, minority committee.

Theatre Authority, executive board.

Young Women's Christian Association Performing Arts Center, chair, activities committee.

Theatre Companies:

Actors Equity Library Theatre, Los Angeles.

Circle Theatre in the Round, Los Angeles.

East-West Players.

Inner City Cultural Center, Los Angeles, cofounder.

Karamu House, Cleveland, director, Children's Theatre and Young Adult Theatre.

Lutheran Church Improvisational Theatre, director.

Native American Indian Theatre, Los Angeles.

Negro Art Theatre, Los Angeles, executive producer.

AWARDS AND HONORS:

Frances E. Williams Crystal Stair Award, Black Women of the Theater, West, established in Williams's honor.

Inner City Cultural Center.

Lieutenant governor of California.

Los Angeles City Council.

Office of Mayor Tom Bradley.

National Association for the Advancement of Colored People Image Award, Hall of Fame.

National Women of Journalism.

Paul Robeson Pioneer Award, Black American Cinema Society.

Rosa Parks Award, Southern Christian Leadership Conference.

Saint Philip's Episcopal Church.

INTERVIEW HISTORY

INTERVIEWERS:

Richard Cándida Smith, Associate Director/Principal Editor, UCLA Oral History Program. B.A., Theater Arts, UCLA; M.A., Ph.D., United States History, UCLA.

Karen Anne Mason, B.A., English, Simmons College; M.A., Art History, UCLA.

TIME AND SETTING OF INTERVIEW:

Place: Williams's home, Los Angeles.

Dates, length of sessions: March 11, 1992 (81 minutes); March 25, 1992 (90); April 1, 1992 (81); April 29, 1992 (82); May 13, 1992 (62); May 27, 1992 (90); February 24, 1993 (104).

Total number of recorded hours: 9.85

Persons present during interview: Williams, Smith, and Mason.

CONDUCT OF INTERVIEW:

In preparing for the interview, Smith and Mason consulted published materials on Williams, Karamu House, African American theater groups between 1920 and 1960, Williams's husband William Anthony Hill, and African Americans who lived in the Soviet Union during the 1930s.

The interview is organized chronologically, beginning with Williams's early life and continuing through her career in theater, film, and television and her involvement in the African American community in Los Angeles. Major topics discussed include Williams's involvement with Karamu House, her roles in theater and films, personal and professional experiences in the Soviet Union in the 1930s, and her political activism and efforts to promote racial equality in theater and in the motion picture industry.

EDITING:

Betsy A. Ryan, editor, edited the interview. She checked the verbatim transcript of the interview against the original tape recordings, edited for punctuation, paragraphing, and spelling, and verified proper names. Words and phrases inserted by the editor have been bracketed.

Williams passed away before she had the opportunity to review a draft transcript and thus some of the proper names, particularly those of family members and personal friends, have not been verified.

Susan Douglass Yates, editor, prepared the biographical summary, interview history, and table of contents. Derek J. DeNardo, editorial assistant, compiled the index.

SUPPORTING DOCUMENTS:

The original tape recordings of the interview are in the university archives and are available under the regulations governing the use of permanent noncurrent records of the university. Records relating to the interview are located in the office of the UCLA Oral History Program.

The Frances Williams papers are housed at the Southern California Library for Social Studies and Research, Los Angeles.

TAPE NUMBER: I, SIDE ONE

MARCH 11, 1992

MASON: Today is March 11 and Richard [Cándida] Smith and I are talking with Frances Williams in her home in Los Angeles. Miss Williams, when and where were you born?

WILLIAMS: I wasn't, I was hatched. [laughter] No, I was born in East Orange, New Jersey, September 17, 1905.

MASON: And who were your parents?

WILLIAMS: Elizabeth Nelson Jones--and Williams [laughter]--and my father was William Jones. I had a stepfather, though, who reared me really.

MASON: And what was his name?

WILLIAMS: Benjamin Williams.

MASON: Did you have brothers and sisters?

WILLIAMS: I had two brothers, both older.

MASON: And what were their names?

WILLIAMS: William, and the other, we called him P. L. He said his name was Percy Lloyd, but don't call him that. [laughter]

MASON: What can you tell us about your parents' backgrounds and their interests and your two brothers' backgrounds and interests at that time as a child in East Orange?

WILLIAMS: My father drove a grocery wagon or-- Yeah, a

wagon, a horse and wagon.

SMITH: Your father or stepfather?

WILLIAMS: My father. For A & P. My mother was a laundress, and she only went to the second grade, but was very in love with theater, and she played a mandolin and sang. She was the one who took me to New York almost weekly to see plays.

MASON: How did she become interested in theater?

WILLIAMS: I don't know. She just always was. Just a part of her.

SMITH: Did she ever perform professionally, too?

WILLIAMS: No, I think not.

SMITH: Or as an amateur?

WILLIAMS: No, but my grandfather, that is the father of my father, had stables where he had all of the fancy carriages and things, and horses. He would handle the big weddings and baptisms and Christmas parties for the townsmen.

MASON: This is in East Orange?

WILLIAMS: In East Orange. And then he would announce the guests as they arrived. I was always very impressed with his announcing voice. [laughter]

SMITH: Do you know how long your family was in New Jersey?

WILLIAMS: About three generations.

SMITH: Three generations.

WILLIAMS: My mother's father was Cherokee Indian. When I was born-- I think when I was born-- Anyway, when my mother was with him, he had a shoe cobbler shop in New York. And it's rather interesting. He had a good voice, and he would sing on the corners and collect crowds and then the politicians would come in and make their spiels. I was just wondering-- That's about all I can think of that would relate to theater when I was young.

MASON: So when you say your mother played the mandolin, did she play just for the family?

WILLIAMS: And friends.

MASON: And would your father at all--?

WILLIAMS: No. He was just a great guy.

MASON: Did he die early?

WILLIAMS: Yes, I was only three when he died. My mother had no wish for girls, and so it was very important the relationship between my father and me.

MASON: What about other people, not necessarily theater related, but, you know, in your family? I mean the background of your grandparents and their grandparents. How much do you know about that? Was that something that was important to you?

WILLIAMS: Not a great deal. My mother sang in the choir at a church that was about two houses from where we lived.

And she'd put us to bed and say to listen for her when she was at choir rehearsal so we could hear her voice sing us to sleep. My aunt, the only sister my mother had, was Lily, Lillian, and she lived next door to us. She had about the same number of children as my mother, as I recall. She had an older son about the age of my oldest brother; and a daughter about the age of my brother, my youngest brother; and then she had two more sons and a daughter.

MASON: I guess I was just curious about if you are aware of the place in the South that maybe your family migrated from a long time ago?

WILLIAMS: Well, it was so long-- We spent most of the time-- You know, I was a city girl.

MASON: Yeah.

WILLIAMS: Which is kind of unusual, I know. But I had a grandmother-- A great-grandmother? My mother's mother. I don't know, I think it was her great-grandmother who lived in Virginia. She was one of the founders of the [Order of the] Eastern Star, which is one of the oldest black women's organizations in the country. It was kind of like the women's organization--

MASON: Like a women's club?

WILLIAMS: --with the Masons.

MASON: Oh, okay.

WILLIAMS: You know, like the auxiliary kind of thing of the Masons. I had an Aunt Effie that we were very fond of that was my father's sister. She owned property in New Jersey, I don't know where, that she willed to my youngest brother. But other than that, we were just hard-working people.

SMITH: What was the black community in East Orange like? How big was it?

WILLIAMS: I left when I was three.

SMITH: Oh, okay. [laughter]

WILLIAMS: I don't remember.

SMITH: So your father died when you were three?

WILLIAMS: But I'll tell you the kinds of things that I do remember. Mother talked about, or people at the dinner table and so forth would speak about, current things that were going on at the time, you know, that were rather interesting. There was Bob [Robert Green] Ingersoll. Did you ever hear of him?

SMITH: I know of the Ingersoll family.

WILLIAMS: Well, that was the family, and he was an atheist, I think. And at that time almost everywhere I remember going, I don't know why I remember it, but people were all very interested: this man didn't believe in God. [laughter] It was the topic of conversation almost everywhere. I remember it very vividly, you know. It was

so terrible that this man didn't believe in God. The other topic of conversation that we had at that time a lot was Thomas [A.] Edison. We had a Victrola with a horn like a morning glory, and the dog and his master's voice. That's about all I can tell you about New Jersey.

[laughter]

SMITH: So when you were three your father died and then--

WILLIAMS: We moved. My mother and dad, I never knew why, they moved from New Jersey to Pittsburgh. My oldest brother was sent to a boarding school, because he was about ten or twelve then, I guess. He's about ten years older than I. My youngest brother and I followed our parents later on the train, and I remember I had a doll that was bigger than I was. [laughter] The people on the train were wonderful. I remember the Horseshoe Curve they had, this big train that went around the curve. You could stay in the front of the train and see the other part of it on the other side of the galley or whatever it was. They took Bill and me so that we could see this, and we were so impressed that it was the same train going around the curve. [laughter] That's about all I remember of New Jersey.

MASON: So when you were three years old, your mother was taking you to New York to see plays. Do you remember what kinds of--?

WILLIAMS: *The Big Red Shawl* and *In Dahomey*, and most of the big shows and important actors at that time. Quite [inaudible] for a laundress. [laughter] [tape recorder off]

SMITH: I think when we left off you were on the train to Pittsburgh.

WILLIAMS: We got to Pittsburgh, and we no sooner arrived than my father died. Mother had to put us in an orphanage. She didn't know anyone there; she didn't know what to do. But we were miserable, of course. I always say I cried and peed for two weeks, [laughter] morning, noon, and night, it was so miserable. So we told Mother that if she'd try to find a way of taking us so that we could all be together that we would start working. That's why I started working at age five, and my little brother started at age seven. And we worked. We're still-- I'm still working. He died, but I'm still working.

SMITH: What kind of jobs did you do at the age of five?

WILLIAMS: I took care of a little girl and earned \$3 a week. Her parents were working in a war plant, making some kind of little something or other that went in a gun or around a gun. And I gave her her lunch. I was five, and I couldn't go to kindergarten because I had a job. [laughter]

MASON: Your mother, she must have eventually found some

employment for herself?

WILLIAMS: Laundress. That's about all people could find that worked if they were black then. Either that or cook. But before I left--

SMITH: Did she work in a--?

WILLIAMS: Homes.

SMITH: Oh, in homes, okay. I was wondering if she worked in laundry plants.

WILLIAMS: No, no. That was a rather rough period, but Mother made friends easily, and most people were very fond of her. She was a great raconteur, [laughter] and they just loved her stories, everyone did, all of her life. Anyway, we got home--God, that was wonderful--and Mother, I guess, fell in love, or someone fell in love with her. Ben [Benjamin] Williams, who was a policeman. I can see him now with that big helmet light and all the brass buttons. But he was very good to us, and stayed. We were all together until he died.

SMITH: In Pittsburgh?

WILLIAMS: We started in Pittsburgh and moved to Cleveland. From Cleveland I guess I went to Europe and came back, and I ended up in Los Angeles.

MASON: You went to New York, though. Didn't you go to New York in between, and Chicago?

WILLIAMS: Uh-huh, I did, I've been to both places. But I

lived in New York right after my second marriage.

SMITH: How old were you when you moved to Cleveland?

WILLIAMS: Most of my elementary school days, and high school and college.

SMITH: You were seven or eight years old when you moved to Cleveland?

WILLIAMS: Well, not that old because I was five when I was in Cleveland.

SMITH: Oh, okay.

WILLIAMS: We went almost immediately to Cleveland.

SMITH: So Cleveland's really where you grew up, then?

WILLIAMS: Most of my life was spent in Cleveland.

SMITH: Okay.

MASON: I know early Cleveland was made up mostly of-- Well, a lot of the areas were mostly European immigrants. It doesn't seem like there were many black families in Cleveland. Is that correct?

WILLIAMS: I don't know. I didn't-- Of course as a child I had no way of gauging that, but there were quite a few, and we had one of the first black councilmen, Tom [Thomas W.] Fleming, who gave me my first municipal job. Very impressive looking man. All that happened in Cleveland. My brother played football there. I couldn't-- Neither of us could join the athletic clubs. They wouldn't let him become captain of football because he was black and all

that kind of thing. We went through a lot of that.

SMITH: This was in high school?

WILLIAMS: There were only three blacks in the school at that-- I guess it was a small--

SMITH: What section of Cleveland did you live in?

WILLIAMS: We lived around Cedar Avenue and we ended up living on Eighty-ninth Street. A beautiful home that all the children paid for. We called our mother our pimp.

[laughter] Is this on now?

SMITH: Yeah. [laughter] Maybe you need to explain that.

WILLIAMS: We all took care of her. She was charming. We'd buy her diamond earrings, and next week we had to go to the pawnshop to get them out. [laughter] We bought her Wedgwood china, and then it would all be in the pawnshop. [laughter]

MASON: What did she do with the money?

WILLIAMS: Food or whatever the household needed.

MASON: Wasn't the salary for a policeman pretty good?

WILLIAMS: Oh, he wasn't a policeman in Cleveland.

MASON: Oh.

WILLIAMS: He was a policeman in Pittsburgh.

MASON: Oh, I see. And in Cleveland?

WILLIAMS: He was the footman at the May Company.

MASON: A footman, I don't know what that is.

WILLIAMS: He was the man-- At that time, people would

drive up, and at important department stores there would be a man who would open the door and help you out and see that your car is picked up and taken where it was supposed to go. He was quite a guy.

SMITH: You had mentioned that your mother didn't like girls. Could we infer from that that you had a difficult relationship with her?

WILLIAMS: I worked all my life winning my mother's love, all of my life. You know, it was important to me. And, yes, I actually clothed my mother for many, many years. I saw that she had handmade dresses and coats and things that I thought would make her look lovely. But I earned it, you know, I earned my money taking care of children mostly. For instance, we lived on a street in Cleveland, and from the time I was-- [Let's] see if I can figure the time. For instance, the homes on that street were owned by the younger members of wealthy families. And in the summer they'd release their nurse, their governesses, for the vacation for periods of two weeks. And I would go from house to house all summer covering those vacations of the governesses and work with the children in each family. Meanwhile, Mother taught me how to iron and mend shirts standing on a box. [laughter] We lived in apartments because we could get into a neighborhood where the schools were better. My stepfather was very concerned about us,

and I mean my mother was too. But we worked, we all worked. In the apartments we all-- My youngest brother and I had to shovel all the snow and empty the garbage and the papers in the morning before we went to school. And usually the work that I did was often with families who lived in the apartments, because there was always a family coverage kind of thing.

SMITH: What kind of religious background did your family have? Did you go to church regularly?

WILLIAMS: Well, my mother was African Methodist Episcopalian. One Sunday my youngest brother and I joined church, and they invited us to go to a-- We had to go to a class or something on Monday nights at the church. And we went. And one night, I guess we had been going about three or four nights for, you know, different times, they turned it into-- They said the minister couldn't be there that night. So they were going to turn it into a big prayer meeting. Well, we'd never been exposed to anything like that. We didn't know what to do. Everyone who was in the church that night prayed but Bill and me.

[laughter] Neither of us knew what to say or what to do, so they started fussing at us and said, "If you can't pray, you can say, 'Bless the Lord.'" And we were so hurt, we never went back to church. [laughter] Well, that was the end of that at the Methodist church. Then

later--I wonder how I did this?--I used to-- The
Episcopalian church, Saint Andrews Church, had projects,
and they even had a theater workshop. I went there. I
was very impressed, I think, by the ceremony with the
candles and the lights and the vestments. And the sisters
wore [Christian] Dior. Once the costumes and clothes were
designed by Dior, and I thought they were really smart.

[laughter]

MASON: The Episcopalian Church has always been up there.

[laughter]

WILLIAMS: And we became very active. In fact I got
baptized there, and that's how I changed my name from
Fanny Lizzie to Frances Elizabeth. My whole family-- It's
funny, I was the youngest member of my family, and yet
they all came and joined the Episcopalian Church after I
did. But there I became a member of the Sunday school and
ended up being superintendent of the Sunday school and
president of the altar guild and the choir. I did it
wholeheartedly. I still made about \$3 or \$4 a week, and I
could have about fifty cents of that. Twenty-five cents
was spent on cookies that you put in the pantry and hid.
And the other-- Car fare was three cents one way to
church, and usually I would pay one way and walk back.
That's how often I went to church. [laughter]

MASON: What kind of people would they bring into the

theater at the church? What sort of people were there holding--?

WILLIAMS: There was a wonderful man who was in charge of the theater workshop by the name of Arthur Spencer. I was very impressed with his work and his ability. I don't know what I used for judgment, but I liked him, and he did some, I thought, very fine, thoughtful things. What other highlights of the church? My mother and the priest and his wife and children became very good friends, so that whenever the priest and his wife had to leave town, the children always stayed with us. He had a son and a daughter: Orrin Southern, who ended up being a very fine organist. He had concerts everywhere; he was a very famous one.

I quit that church. [laughter] Later I quit that church because I had an opportunity-- I danced very well, and I loved dancing. There was a doctor whose son, Chilton Thomas I think his name was, had an act of dancers. They were doing the Charleston, and I was very good. [laughter] He wanted to take me on the road and give me a contract to go with him. So I asked my family if I could go, and they said they had to ask the priest. And he said, "No, I feel that she's like my daughter and I wouldn't want my daughter to go, and I don't want Frances to go." So I quit the church instead. [laughter]

SMITH: And you went?

WILLIAMS: No, I didn't go. Then a dancing teacher from Detroit, who was a sister of a member of our church, had a big dancing school in Detroit. And when she saw my work she wanted me to come and work with her and help teach. But I never got to do that either. So I was really very upset with Father Southern, but I learned a lot of things there. It's amazing how much there is to learn every minute, isn't it?

SMITH: What sort of things did you learn?

WILLIAMS: Well, I mean you think of all the very fine composers from music and the *Messiah*, and all the things you learn in church. And then in the theater I learned a lot of things there. I remember one time-- Probably one of the most prominent women in the church was a cateress and handled very big parties and things all over the city. She got angry with the priest once and decided that she would not do the spring luncheon, which she had always done. And I said, "The hell with her, I'll do it."

[laughter] I was about thirteen or something. And we had one of the most successful luncheons. We had a color scheme of white, light yellow, and darker yellow. People had to bring their own silverware and dress their tables with their own silverware and their own crystal. And then we had caterers to do the dinner: my mother and people

came and then did the cooking and salads and desserts and things. But it was one of the most successful ones they ever had. [laughter] And I think I was about thirteen.

During that period-- [I'm] trying to think, was it then or a little later? [I] guess it was later. When I was in high school, I was offered a job at the-- They built a big gymnasium and swimming pool, Olympic size, and they didn't have anyone to-- My black councilman-- There were not many black women who did anything with athletics, and I won all the dashes and the runs and I would hike twenty-five, thirty miles almost every week. I was the only girl who did this that was black. And when they wanted somebody for a job, I was the only one who did it, you know. So his niece lived with him, and we were good friends. She said, "Look. Uncle Tom [laughter] wants you to come down and see him about a job." And I said, "Good." So she came by, and we went down on the streetcar together to see Uncle Tom. I could have called it "municipal" at that time. I'll never forget, I didn't even know how to pronounce the name of what I was supposed to go get. And he told me about this beautiful athletic edifice or part of a building that they were building. It had a huge playground, and it had a running track outside, they had a running track around the pool. It was really a lovely place. He wanted me to take over the girls' work

there. And I did. I worked there for a number of years. I said, "The hell with working on body beautiful, I want to do something with my head." [laughter] So I went from that into social work at Karamu House, which was probably one of the largest cultural setups at that time for blacks.

SMITH: So you went there because of the social work rather than the theater initially?

WILLIAMS: Well, there was theater, too.

SMITH: Yeah, I know. But which was the pull initially?

WILLIAMS: Both.

SMITH: Both.

WILLIAMS: Both.

SMITH: How old were you when you went there?

WILLIAMS: I was quite-- I was in my teens. It was probably the last year of high school. I quit high school five times.

SMITH: How come?

WILLIAMS: Because I made more money than most people did, and I didn't understand why you had to go to school. My mother had only gone to the second grade; I didn't know anyone who had done any more. So that was not an important thing. The principal, I can hear him now saying, "You are cutting off your nose to spite your face." And I said, "I probably am, but I'll try it again

for a while." I ended up graduating in summer school.

[laughter]

MASON: Did you do a lot of reading on your own, then?

WILLIAMS: I did always. I read a book a night for years. The way I had to do it-- We had a bedroom for the boys and a bedroom for my mother and father, and then we had this big dining room and living room in the apartment. They'd put a screen around my bed at night, and they usually kept the light on for my oldest brother, who had returned to live with us. And I would hold the book up so I could see the light through the crack in the screen and keep pushing it up so I could read all night. [laughter] And I read a book almost every night. I loved to read.

Another funny thing, all of these rich kids on the street took toe dancing [ballet], and I thought it was so beautiful, and I wanted to toe dance. But I thought because of the shape of the shoe, that they put their foot in and turned and landed on the kind of knuckles of their feet, you know.

MASON: Oh. You thought their toes were bent back.

WILLIAMS: I couldn't walk a block that way. And why my feet are not distorted, I have no idea.

MASON: Oh. [laughter]

WILLIAMS: I did that for years.

SMITH: I wanted to ask you also about some of the sort of

broader political activities, things that were going on in the black communities in America at the time, and the degree to which, for instance, you or your family were interested or following, let's say, the [Marcus] Garvey movement.

WILLIAMS: No, we-- This is terrible to say. I remember hearing about the Garvey movement, but it was called the UNIA [Universal Negro Improvement Association]. Mom called them the "ugliest niggers in America," [laughter] you know, in the conversations at home and around. But in Cleveland I was very active at that time. Most of the blacks who came who were here or were north had been Democrats. You know, they only had the Democratic Party in the South. So no one wanted to be a Democrat if you were black. And what did I do, how did I get in? I'm trying to think of the doctor who influenced me a lot, a Dr. Roger. I know what I did. He had a receptionist in his office that I met that went with a group of young women, and she wanted to go on a vacation. She got the job for me to carry over for three or four weeks for her while she went on vacation. I met this wonderful doctor, and he was very interested in changing from the Republican to the Democratic Party. Meanwhile, my Uncle Tom, the councilman, was a Republican, you see, was the big Republican leader. But anyway, I worked very hard to see

that blacks changed to Democrats in Cleveland.

MASON: I'm sorry, I'm confused. The blacks in Cleveland, they weren't Republicans?

WILLIAMS: Most of them were. And we were trying to change that.

MASON: To?

WILLIAMS: To Democrats.

SMITH: Were the Democrats in Ohio offering anything? I mean, it doesn't seem to me that either the Republicans or the Democrats had much to offer black people at that time.

WILLIAMS: At that time there were jobs. For instance, when I left-- Cleveland, you see, had one of the first black mayors, [Carl] Stokes. And we had at one time, I remember, six blacks on our council. We worked.

And then we had another organization that was very good that I worked very hard in there, and that was called the Future Outlook League. What we discovered is that if we got money together so that blacks could have their own business, they weren't qualified to do it because they had no way to know how to do it. So then what we did is set up a whole apprentice thing that we did with different banks and the produce companies and the drugstore. Everywhere. And when they learned the business, got through their apprenticeship, then we got people to get money together so they could get into business. We really

did some pretty good things there. And Cleveland's a good-- We made it quite a good town. For instance, my best girlfriend played violin. Her father had a barbershop right at-- We called where the center was--not the center, but the gymnasium where I worked--the "Roaring Third" of Cleveland. They called it the Roaring Third. I'll never forget my mother talking to a neighbor. We lived then on the outskirts of town, and people were saying, "You won't let your daughter go down in the Roaring Third and work. Oh, you wouldn't want her down there." And my mother said, "Look, I've taught my daughter all that I can teach her. If she doesn't know now, she'll never know." [laughter] And she used to tell me things like, "You watch out for these people, their eyes will be red," [laughter] or some fool thing. I remember looking out the window to say, "Uh-huh, you drink, I know." [laughter] I went through all this.

But I was going to tell you about my friend's father who had the barbershop, a wonderful barbershop, and he was a wonderful man. He had a house in back of the barbershop. There was a yard and then a house. And in this house lived his family, and he had one, two-- I've forgotten how many children he had. But anyway, he would buy two theater season tickets for all the big cultural things, and the children took turns going to see them, and

he was a barber. And that probably started exposing me more and more to, I think, these kinds of cultural things. It's so wonderful, Dorothy started studying violin, and she ended up being one of the first black women to play with the [Cleveland] Women's Symphony, and played for years and years in the Women's Symphony in Cleveland.

Then I got involved in Karamu House. It was then called the Gilpin Players. They were located at a settlement on Thirty-ninth Street called [the] Playhouse Settlement [of the Neighborhood Association]. It's interesting. We had a composition of Italians--many Italians--Jewish, and blacks. And I had mothers clubs and children's clubs. When I moved from the gymnasium, I got the job at the settlement house, and we had a wonderful setup there. It was all pretty cultural. For instance, if we had a biology group, we could turn the whole project, say, on frogs, from pollywogs to frogs, into a play. And then we'd not only write the play and make the costumes-- In the children's theater at least we did this. We did the costumes. We had a little print shop, and they could print their programs. They collected the money, two cents for each performance. And they had ushers. They did everything that had to be done in that theater, those youngsters. I haven't seen a setup anywhere yet that was better. I remember a little Italian girl one day wanted

so much to be a fairy princess, you know, or a fairy godmother or whatever they call them with wands and tutus and all that business. So I thought well, hell-- She was a gawky kind of person. She had red hair and bangs, Buster Brown-style haircut, and she was big and gawky, awkward. And I said, "It would be horrible for this child to go through life wanting to be a fairy princess," you know. And I said, "I'll tell you, we'll find a play or write a play so you can be the fairy godmother in it." And we did. I'll never forget the first day we got ready to do this, a Saturday morning or afternoon, I was just on the other side of the stage to give the signal for the curtain to go up when I heard this, "Psst, psst, Miss Williams." And she came running across the stage and I said, "What's the matter, darling?" She said, "Could we do this next Saturday?" [laughter]

MASON: Poor thing.

WILLIAMS: I said, [whispering] "No, we can't."
[laughter]

But we had a very fine art department there. We took these old buildings and made the theater. That's where we made Karamu. Before, we'd been playing in gymnasiums and different places in schools. The Jelliffes [Rowena and Russell W.] went to Oberlin College. When they graduated they took this little house with a yard and made it into a

playground and a little playhouse, with offices upstairs. And then they bought the corner property where there were poolrooms and things you have in the neighborhood. We gutted that all out and made a theater. That's how we made Karamu Theatre. It was the only place at that time, you see, in this country where black writers could present their wares. We had Countee Cullen and Langston Hughes and [W. E. B.] DuBois. Everybody came there. I met all the most wonderful people you can imagine right there and got to know them. That's where I met Paul Robeson, Ethel Waters, and Charles Gilpin. All these people I met there.

MASON: I have a lot questions to ask you about that, but I think Richard wanted to ask some other questions.

SMITH: Yeah, well, they sort of blend together, actually. But continuing, we asked about Garvey. What about DuBois and the NAACP [National Association for the Advancement of Colored People]? Was there--?

WILLIAMS: I remember that was just beginning at that time, and I didn't belong to it, but the Jelliffes did, who were the directors of the Playhouse Settlement. But we were all very interested. And we helped. I think we even raised money for them, things like that. Another thing the Gilpin Players raised money for was, one year I think we probably were the first group to send an artist to Africa to bring back artifacts for the museums

[Cleveland Museum of Natural History and Cleveland Museum of Art]. We did that, and that was in the early, I don't know, it must have been in the early twenties.

TAPE NUMBER: I, SIDE TWO

MARCH 11, 1992

WILLIAMS: Who was interested in Africa? We all were. And I don't know how we got so involved in it, but we were all interested. You see, the members of the Gilpin Players included black principals of schools, teachers, dentists-- I'd say professional blacks, primarily. We did six plays a year, and we seated about sixty-five people in our theater. We were interested in mostly the popular-- But that wasn't so popular then. But we were very interested in Africa. Then, of course, when we invested in the things, and we had-- Oh, I know probably-- We never had bells when we announced the opening of the theater production. We used drums. And we got these drums, you know, these special drums. I think that's part of-- I'm trying to unwind, to find out why we were doing Africa. But I think all of us, we were really kind of-- Then of course in the process we were looking for plays. There were very few plays for blacks then, and many of them had to be kind of redone for a black group of actors. I'm trying to think. We did plays from Gullah. We got a group of plays in the Gullah language, or--

SMITH: That had been written on the Carolina coast?

WILLIAMS: I'm trying to think. The North Carolina

Players, we did several of their things. I think they did those too. We did *Toussaint L'Overture*, we did a lot of plays.

SMITH: Were there any productions that stand out in your mind as real important to you?

WILLIAMS: Yes, yes. [laughter] Let's see. Katharine Cornell did *Scarlet Sister Mary* on Broadway. And I got to do *Scarlet Sister Mary*. And the--

SMITH: Do you remember who the author of that is?

WILLIAMS: I've forgotten now [Julia Peterkin]. But the drama critic in the *Cleveland Plain Dealer* went to see her do it in New York, and then he compared me to her and said I was so much better. [laughter]

SMITH: I'm afraid this is a play I'm not familiar with, so maybe--

WILLIAMS: Oh, *Scarlet Sister Mary*?

SMITH: Yeah.

WILLIAMS: Stupid play. [laughter] I think it's one of those things which I later had a big fight in New York about--not this play but one like it--where a woman, a black woman, has all of these children, I think probably all by different husbands. And I don't know what it was all about even now. I should reread it.

But I remember my mother came down. She was then living in Oberlin, Ohio, and she would come down and

spend, you know, a weekend, or days with me. And when I was struggling to learn lines I was working around the clock. Because when we were working in the theater I had an apartment upstairs over the puppeteer's shop, the marionette shop. And I would put on a pot of soup or juju bread and something and feed the crowd. You know, at midnight or ten o'clock or something we were working, so that you found yourself-- I was teaching and working all day, putting out the food, and working on sets and costumes and theater at night, because I was in most of the plays. But my mother came down. She said, "How you doing, baby?" And I said, "Mama, if I could just get this goddamn prayer I'd be all right." She'd say, "Oh, baby, baby don't say that." [laughter] And let's see, another thing about *Scarlet Sister Mary*-- There was a chap by the name of Paul Banks, who was a fine actor. I think Paul was a teacher too, and he came out to Hollywood and he passed. We never found him. You understand what I'm saying?

MASON: Yeah.

WILLIAMS: I don't know whether you do. Yeah? Yeah?

MASON: Yeah. [laughter]

WILLIAMS: All right. And I remember we had a scene where I stood over Paul praying because someone had lynched him or killed him or hit him, something happened. And I was

praying over him, and the curtains closed, and as they opened again this shoe came over, out from the wings, and hit me. [laughter] And he says, "Goddamn it, you ought to learn not to eat onions when you're gonna pray over somebody on the stage." [laughter] So I learned.

I'd like to know what happened to Paul. But we had very important people who came, and it enriched our whole living a great deal. It did mine.

SMITH: This is something we're going to have to go into. Next time, we'll continue with the Karamu, because we need to go into a lot of detail.

MASON: Yeah.

WILLIAMS: Uh-huh.

SMITH: I was wondering if you knew A. Philip Randolph or Chandler Owen?

WILLIAMS: I have a wonderful story about A. Philip.

[laughter]

SMITH: Okay.

WILLIAMS: Mostly in any kind of settlement or social work setup, you had a boys worker and a girls worker. Well, I had worked so long with my mothers clubs, and my-- My fathers were in the Depression period, and they didn't like being at home. There was no job. There was no place for them to go. They didn't like being at home all day. So I said, "Well, let's have a club." And as a girls

worker, I developed this fathers club. I started with seven men and ended up with three hundred. It was a full day and night job, you see, because I taught them to speak, make speeches, discuss current events, challenge people who, like A. Philip Randolph, would come to town. And he came to that organization. It was a strong men's group, and that's where I first met him.

And then later when I was doing theater cross-country, he would go almost every place I went to see me work. He said, "No one can come down the steps like Frances Williams. No one can enter a stage-- And you knew where she was coming from, and when she left you knew where she was going." [laughter] He was fun. I really enjoyed him a great deal. I saw a lot of him in Chicago. It was a difficult thing with the men because, you see, the unions were so prejudiced. And to find out, "Well, where did you stand, how could you stand there?" There were all of these questions that had to be answered and we had to face. They were not easy. And I think it's still true. In many of the unions we have this great problem of not really understanding the struggle of the Latino and the Asian and the blacks. And which way to go. Because while many times people mean well, they aren't doing so well. You know what I mean?

SMITH: Yes.

WILLIAMS: [laughter] But it's true, it's true. I'm right in the midst of something now that makes me very unhappy. It makes me very unhappy.

SMITH: Concerning the unions?

WILLIAMS: Well, it's an organization, a political organization that's-- And the head of it is a millionaire. [He] and his wife both called me to get my opinion about something, and after I gave it, and even checked it at the horse's mouth, they've gone ahead and done what they planned doing in the beginning. It's regarding Rosa Parks, so I'm really very upset about it. I'm very upset. I'm damned angry. [laughter] So, I mean, what I say is that it's still going on.

SMITH: How did you feel personally about Philip Randolph's--

WILLIAMS: Philos--

SMITH: --philosophy, his argument in the twenties that socialism was necessary--?

WILLIAMS: Well, I think he was very courageous because he had everything against him. And to know that there had to be change, no matter how you got it, I think this was very clear to A. Philip Randolph. And I think with change there are always prices to pay.

SMITH: Uh-huh.

WILLIAMS: And you have to be willing to pay them. I wish

it wasn't always true, but it just seems to be. One of the facts of life.

SMITH: Was there much response? Say in this men's group, was the response affirmative or skeptical when he came to town?

WILLIAMS: We argued it through, and I think it was affirmative. I think all during the period of discussion every-- For a year or so it was we've got to have jobs, we have to be recognized, we have to have some dignity with our jobs, we have to be paid for our jobs.

SMITH: Yeah.

WILLIAMS: All of these things were very important to these people. As they do now, they don't think blacks need money? [laughter] I don't know how you're supposed to eat or have a roof over your head. Don't they come swelling up in my head. [laughter] And it comes usually from people you least expect it. So many things in all of us are so deep-seated. They're so deep that they have been woven into the woof and warp of us. And it's very difficult to even recognize that you have them. It's very difficult. But you know, I was telling somebody jokingly that Arsenio [Hall] exposed some of my own prejudices. [laughter] But this is why I admire this man with his energy and his love. I think no place have I ever seen anything more beautiful than the love of "Magic" [Earvin

Johnson] and Arsenio and Ike, say. To see it and say, "They're healthy young men, and they love each other." But to see that on a screen-- You don't see, you know. You saw three men together, you'd know they were all lesbians. [laughter] I mean, you know, all homosexuals. But you didn't feel it's true. I mean, it would be all right if they were, but they were so healthy looking, and it was just, "We love each other." And this is a beautiful thing to see, and we need to see more of it. But for me he's-- There are many people that I dislike so much, and he's made me realize that I have no right to dislike them to that degree anyway. [laughter]

SMITH: Did you know Chandler Owen?

WILLIAMS: Who?

SMITH: Chandler Owen?

WILLIAMS: No.

SMITH: What about Cyril Briggs?

WILLIAMS: Yeah. I worked with him.

SMITH: Oh, you did.

WILLIAMS: We had a publication here called *Now*, and it was one of the first interracial newspapers.

SMITH: This was here in Los Angeles?

WILLIAMS: In Los Angeles. The editor was William Cummings. And he had an athletic heart condition, but the army insisted that he go into the army. We always thought

it was because he had this interracial publication. So his wife, who was a very fine woman, just couldn't get the ads and things that could keep the publication going. So I decided to go in to help. And I did. We kept it going for a long time. He was stationed way up in Oregon. I think of all of the things that were wrong for an athletic heart, and we couldn't understand it, and we fought and fought, but nothing happened. But it was a good publication. Did you ever hear of Ted Laberthon?

SMITH: No.

WILLIAMS: Ted Laberthon worked for the *Christian Science Monitor* for a number of years, and he also had a column in this paper. And I was trying to think of what other columnist we had. Briggs later became, I guess, editor or something. He had a job there. Briggs, by the way, is a cousin of a very good friend of mine who died. But he was very fair. They arrested him once, or they were in the process, and the judge called him, asked him-- I don't know whether he was white, or inferred that he was white, or stated that he was white, and he wanted to sue the judge. [laughter] Cyril was a character. He was so fair you just wouldn't ever-- He didn't even have any of the movements of a black man, you know, as we would know a black man.

MASON: Sounds like Walter White.

WILLIAMS: Well, sort of. I knew Walter, I can tell you a story there too. [laughter]

SMITH: Okay, go ahead.

WILLIAMS: I don't know where to start. Russell and Rowena Jelliffe at the Karamu House, I'll never forget, one time went to New York. And they went to Walter and asked him if he would refer some people so that they could raise some funds for Karamu House. And Walter gave them several names of very wealthy people in New York they could go to see. Before they could get to see them, Walter had called them and asked for money. [laughter] And that was their quota for blacks, you know, that was it.

Another story out here-- Katherine Dunham, I think, was here when I first came out on the West Coast, and I helped organize her group to go on the road. And Katherine Dunham and I were talking about Paul Robeson doing *Saunders of the River*. Do you remember *Saunders of the River*, the play, the picture about Africa?

MASON: Right.

WILLIAMS: It was not good, and we were very unhappy about it. And Essie [Eslanda Goode Robeson] came out here. Paul didn't come out, but Essie came out, his wife, and wanted to-- She was visiting and Walter White was out here

at the same time. So Katherine Dunham and I said, "Let's have them for dinner." I think that was it. No, we tried to talk with them and we just couldn't get through, so finally we said, "Let's invite them for dinner." So we fixed dinner. Katherine was a pretty good cook and I was a pretty good cook, and we cooked dinner and had Essie and Walter over. We fought like cats and dogs. We fought, we fought. They never admitted that *Saunders of the River* was not a good thing for Paul to be in. Here was the head of the NAACP and Paul's wife Essie and-- Katherine and I really fought, and we ended up not winning. Essie said, "Look, we have to make money before we have any power, and we're going to have power, and we're going to do it by making money. And we're going to make money." So that was really her attitude.

SMITH: How did you feel about that argument at the time?

WILLIAMS: I hated it. I've paid too great a price every step I've ever taken. I got it the hard way, and I certainly regret none of it. I don't regret the prices that I've paid for it, and I know I've paid prices I didn't know about. But if I had it to do over again, I'd do it. And to have young actors come to you and say, "Your statements have given us courage," that's all I needed.

SMITH: What about today, contemporary, if you take

somebody like Eddie Murphy? I mean I've heard that same argument used about people like Eddie Murphy, that his money gives him power to do something within Hollywood.

How do you feel about that today, that kind of argument?

WILLIAMS: Well, you have to clarify where you're coming from a little better.

SMITH: I mean in terms-- I asked you how you felt about Essie Robeson's argument--

WILLIAMS: About making money?

SMITH: --about making money.

WILLIAMS: Oh, and the empowerment that it might give you?

SMITH: And the empowerment. How do you feel about that same argument today? Because it's still made.

WILLIAMS: I think so. I do feel this: you see, the thing that's difficult is that we haven't had an opportunity to learn.

SMITH: Uh-huh.

WILLIAMS: And the price you have to pay for that-- You can't suddenly have wisdom. Wisdom isn't leveled out. I think that you have to stay on integrity to the degree that you're able to, and if you get too far off track there ought to be enough people around to tell you you're off track. I really do. And it's also why I'm going to see Arsenio, because I think that these people that are this courageous with this kind of healthy energy deserve

to have help from people who've had experience. And you have to know how to lovingly give it so that it can be accepted.

Yeah, I think that many, many of the young people-- Well, maybe they're making mistakes some, but who didn't make a mistake? Why do they have to be perfect? You know? If it's-- Is it Emerson who says, "If it's right today and you believe it, fight for it. If tomorrow it's completely the opposite, and it makes sense to you, and you believe it, fight for that, what you've got tomorrow"? But I do think that they're difficult times, and I think it's mostly because the catch-up job is so difficult. I think just the job of trying to catch up, and when you get it to know what to do with it [is difficult]. Most of them are doing more than other people did with the catch-up. For instance, I think some of the projects of children's agencies and things that Eddie Murphy, for instance, and Arsenio and these guys are doing, this is very good. I think in their productions-- I think they've come a hell of a long way without help. And they have a right to make their own statement about it, I think.

SMITH: If we were to go back to 1925, and you're in Cleveland at the Karamu House, and you're twenty years old, what did you do--?

WILLIAMS: When I'm twenty years?

SMITH: You're twenty years old in 1925, correct?

WILLIAMS: Yeah.

SMITH: What did you want to see happen with yourself and with everything around you? What were your ambitions, your goals?

WILLIAMS: My own personal ones?

SMITH: Your own personal ones.

WILLIAMS: I don't know, I just always wanted to be a part of everything that was going on. I mean, I liked the political things, I liked the struggle. At school, I quit high school because I didn't like what they did. I couldn't get in the athletic club when I was one of the best athletic people there because I was black, and they had to do their swimming at the Cleveland Athletic Club, where they didn't take Negroes. So I could never learn how to swim, so I couldn't become a member of the club. Well, that's hard, if that's your love. I thought, "Oh, to be able to swim and run and jump, outjump everybody." It's very important at that age. And for my brother, too, my younger brother, this was hard. I didn't like it at all. I used to hike twenty-five and thirty-five miles a weekend. I would cry and walk and say, "Oh God, why do you do this to my people?" I mean, I was crushed. It was very difficult for me to-- And I was so young I didn't know how to cope with it. But I tried every way I knew

how. And that's why I think I went into the political things in Cleveland with the verve and drive and energy that I did.

SMITH: Did you know Carter G. Woodson?

WILLIAMS: Yes. He came to Karamu. Yes, he spent a week or two with us once. He was a very interesting man. He said, "They're gonna know the truth." [laughter] And who else? I knew lots of people. Most of them came from Karamu, I mean were at Karamu, people like Carter G. Who was the other at Howard University? Alain Locke was another one that I got to know very well there.

What was your question?

SMITH: Well--

WILLIAMS: Thank you. [laughter]

SMITH: --the big question was when you were twenty, what were your personal goals and ambitions? Where did you see yourself going? Did you want to go to Broadway, for example? Or did you at that time dream of going to Hollywood?

WILLIAMS: No, I had an opportunity to go to Broadway when I was at Karamu working and acting and directing. *All God's--no, not All God's Chillun [Got Wings]*, I did that too. I can't think of the name of that play that Richard B. Harrison played God in. Remember?

SMITH: [*The*] *Green Pastures*?

WILLIAMS: *Green Pastures*. They came out and offered me Noah's wife, and at a very good salary. And the Jelliffes in one month gave me five raises. They didn't want me to go. And-- Oh, they took me to Workers School in Cleveland. Do you know what Workers School is?

MASON: No, I don't.

WILLIAMS: Work is a political school that instructed people on Marxist-Leninist things. And they took me in Cleveland. I had never heard of it. They stayed two weeks and I never did stop. [laughter]

SMITH: So you became involved with communists? You became involved with the Communist Party?

WILLIAMS: No, not with the party, but the program.

SMITH: The program.

WILLIAMS: The program was so important, and I learned so many things that I didn't know before. But it always tickled me that they only stayed two weeks after taking me. [laughter] And I went on and ended up going to the Soviet Union.

SMITH: What did you think of--? One of the big issues in the Communist Party was the Negro national colonial question. How did you feel about that as an approach to solving the problems of black Americans?

WILLIAMS: It's funny, I don't think I took it from that angle. I suppose if I generalize-- I guess I did in my

mind generalize it and said they were our problems and not mine.

SMITH: Yeah.

WILLIAMS: For instance, I went to the Soviet Union with a woman by the name of Wilhelmina Burroughs, who helped to organize the school teachers union in New York and was fired. She was on the boat with me and Anna Louise Strong when I first went to the Soviet Union. Wilhelmina Burroughs, after she had been living and doing very fine things in the Soviet Union in television and many areas, after ten years got retroactive pay from New York, [laughter] which I still wallow in. Her husband was one of the few people that I ever knew-- He was a postal clerk, and he won the *Sixty-Four Thousand Dollar Question* on Shakespeare. He was very brilliant. They had three children. None of them did what she did or he did. She sent them to-- What was the wonderful director in Germany, Max--?

MASON: Reinhardt?

WILLIAMS: That's right, he studied with Max Reinhardt. Yeah, *The Blue Bird*. It was his big claim to glory. But her oldest son worked with him, studied theater with him. Her daughter, I can't recall her name, she studied [Émile Jaques-]Dalcroze's eurythmics in Germany and that area. And the youngest boy was the worst. [laughter] He

finally went to the Soviet Union and learned Russian. He was a little boy. He learned Russian and became a translator and an electrical engineer, I think. His wife Margaret [Taylor Burroughs] is quite famous really. She has the Du Sable [Museum of African-American History].

MASON: Yeah, that's who I thought you meant, Margaret Burroughs.

SMITH: Right, yeah.

WILLIAMS: Margaret slept here and lived with me in New York.

SMITH: I did want to ask you, when did you study with Katherine Dunham?

WILLIAMS: I didn't-- Well, I studied and worked with her.

SMITH: You worked with her, okay.

WILLIAMS: And studied with her.

SMITH: So you didn't have--

WILLIAMS: And then later I did costumes with her and John Pratt, her husband. He was a wonderful man.

SMITH: Was this in the twenties?

WILLIAMS: No, in the thirties, after I came back.

SMITH: After you came back, okay. So we'll discuss that later, then, as I'm trying to get a sense of the chronology.

WILLIAMS: I know, I know. Oh, that you're welcome to.

[laughter]

SMITH: In 1925 there was the formation of the American Negro Labor Congress. Were you involved with that?

WILLIAMS: Yes, but I wasn't then. There was another one, I think, that sprung up with Paul here. What did they call it? It may have been black trade unionists? I can find out the name of it.

SMITH: Okay.

WILLIAMS: But I remember there was a wonderful man who was at one time a city planner here in Los Angeles. He was in charge of that department, I don't know what it was called, at USC [University of Southern California]. And I was selling-- I had, oh, about fifty tickets for this black trade unionists function that was coming up. He came by here one day, or I invited him by or something, and he came by on his lunch hour. I said, "Oh, by the way, here I've got some tickets for this thing. I want you to take ten of them." And he said, "But ten, Frances, I don't think I know ten black people." I said, "Hell, do we have to get exploited and then pay to get exploited? Take these damn tickets and sell them and sit down and have a bowl of soup." [laughter] That was a very, very good group. I thought they had their first convention in Cincinnati. And I'll never forget the police department had appointed a black policeman to be in charge of, you know, the kinds of things that police have to be in charge

of, the convention, city kinds of things. And this poor man, every time he had to make a decision about something, instead of making the decision, which is what his job was, he called downtown to ask what he should do. Paul Robeson overheard him doing this, so he said, "Come here." And he sat down and educated that man, "If you're supposed to do this, you do it," and then explained why and what it all meant. He was a great teacher wherever he went. And this man was a different man after we left. Just a different man. But we all-- But where are we going to learn it? There's no place to learn. You're lucky, girl, you came at a time, baby, you didn't have to pave your own way. But we had to, we had to shovel and make the path, and then to tread upon it. It was very difficult.

SMITH: In the 1920s the [Ku Klux] Klan was very active, resurgent, particularly in Indiana, I know, but what was the state of the Klan activity in Ohio, in Cleveland?

WILLIAMS: I don't think it-- I don't remember it. We had-- Of course I was-- I remember, isn't it funny, the thing that was new to me was the Cleveland Play House was doing-- Who was the great Irish playwright?

MASON: Eugene O'Neill? Irish American or Irish?

WILLIAMS: No, Irish.

SMITH: Sean O'Casey? Sean O'Casey, who did *The Plough and the Stars*?

WILLIAMS: Yes. They had a riot about it at the playhouse and they were throwing rotten eggs and tomatoes and it was a mess. And for me it was very shocking to see whites fighting whites this way in the streets of Cleveland. And they did.

SMITH: What was the--?

WILLIAMS: It was because they opposed the play.

SMITH: Oh.

WILLIAMS: You know, he was pretty revolutionary, I guess, in what his statements were in his plays.

SMITH: Yeah, he was not popular in Ireland or with the Irish government.

WILLIAMS: Well, that was the first thing like that that I'd seen. We did a play at Karamu. It sent me to the Soviet Union, it made me make my decision to go-- What was the name of that? *Stevedore*? Ever hear of *Stevedore*? It's a good play. The curtain line was-- Let's see, I threw a brick and said, "I got the red-headed son-of-a-bitch." [laughter] I tell you, it was so cleansing. I cannot tell you. It was just like you got all new air and oxygen in and let it out. It's that deeply pushed in, that whenever you could really get a good breath of fresh air, it was a great, great relief.

TAPE NUMBER: II, SIDE ONE

MARCH 25, 1992

MASON: The last time we talked a little bit about Karamu House, and I just wanted to ask you, how did you find out about Karamu House, that it existed and where it was?

WILLIAMS: Well, I think at that time, distance and space didn't make the difficult barriers that it makes now. We could get to places then that we-- See, I went to this Episcopalian church and I was in their theater workshop there, and I guess there were so few people in the theater workshop at that time that you naturally talked with each other, you know. And that's probably how I found out about it. While I was working at the church workshop. The Jelliffes [Rowena and Russell W.] had graduated from Oberlin [College] in sociology. And they came down to open this playhouse on Thirty-eighth [Street] and Central [Avenue] in Cleveland. They didn't have a theater then. They had a big playground and the little house that had the offices and two--one, two, three--rooms downstairs that we used for games and, you know, a little pool and stuff like that. And that's how the playhouse got started, in that setting. This was just-- There was lots of parking space, so there was a large playground.

I can't help thinking about experiences I had there,

you know, as I think back. Some of them were charming. Russell and Rowena were very much in love and very young, and we were young. Younger. [laughter] And to see these people so in love, just-- We said, "Oh, oh, oh, oh, oh." [laughter] And then, I think that same year we started with them doing plays in various high school auditoriums. Not auditoriums but gymnasiums is where we started. And we did that for a while, I guess over a year it must have been. A good year, anyway. And we developed our audience. The quality of our productions, I guess, was high enough for people to support us. Then there was no other place for black writers to present their wares to be done. They bought another whole strip of buildings on Central Avenue at Thirty-eighth Street that included, I don't know, one big business. I don't know what it was, but there was an old-fashioned round coal stove in it, and the next room was a poolroom, and then there were a couple of other rooms on that. They were all wooden buildings at that time and we painted them all kind of a blue-gray. Sounds elegant doesn't it? In the second room or store we built the theater, the poolroom one. There we had a small entrance where we could take tickets and sell tickets, and then we made a kind of ramp-like arrangement of seats in the back, and then the rest, I think, were just straight chairs. It held about sixty people, I think, in the

auditorium.

SMITH: Was it a proscenium stage or theater-in-the-round?

WILLIAMS: Proscenium. And we could use, you see, the first building, which we didn't use, you know-- In the evening we could use it for dressing rooms and for play readings and many things you have to do that are kind of informal and general. Even rehearsal hall-- We could use it for many things. And for making costumes. Golly, we used it for a lot of things. And then we elevated one end of it. No, I don't know whether we did or not. I guess not. I was thinking we elevated it to be the height of the stage, but I don't think we did. I think the whole back of that poolroom was the stage, and we could go into that room, from one room to another. There were three rooms that we could use. Because I remember one time we did a Toussaint L'Overture play. Remember in the story where the French came down and all of these dignitaries to see what he had or what he was doing? And he sent the army out, and as they left the scene they put on new uniforms. So they were just parading all day, from one group of costumes. Actually that's what they were for us when we did it, until-- It was impressive, and we did the same kind of trick with Karamu. They'd come off the stage, and we'd rush them to that first room I told you about, and there there'd be all these dressers. We'd

start taking their things off on the way back to where they were going to put on a new uniform. And this went on for quite a while; it was very impressive. It just looked like, "How in the hell did they get that many people in that space?" [laughter] But it was effective. So I was saying that to say we had use of all the property at night when the children were not there, you see. That helped a lot. We did lots of things.

Some of the funny things we did-- For instance, we had lights, dimmers, and now you're so used to big boards that look like pianos playing, you know, to get all the lights. You know what we had? We had old-fashioned sewer pipes, those clay sewer pipes. And then we had a metal, copper thing that went down in it, and you filled it with the amount of water that gave you as much dimness to the lights as you wished. And this water would boil up. I don't know whether I can make one now, but it was very effective then. This was our dimming system that we used. I don't know what they do about rain. What do they use for rain in theater now? [Do] you know? Well, then we used a box of beans. [laughter] And the beans would-- We'd pour them, I guess, from one thing into another until you got the amount of powerful rain that you wished, and thunder, of course. I remember one time Rowena-- We ran out of beans--we'd probably eaten them for lunch--but we

ran out of beans, and the show was about to go on. We had on Central Avenue this wonderful man, Mr. Dubinsky. And Mr. Dubinsky had a store that had everything in it, I think, except corn or something like that. But everything, every nail, any kind of anything, gadgets that you needed, Mr. Dubinsky had. And Mr. Dubinsky usually stayed open until about nine o'clock at night. So Rowena ran out and ran down to Mr. Dubinsky's and said, "Mr. Dubinsky, Mr. Dubinsky, I need some beans to make a noise." [laughter] So she got the beans in time for the production. [laughter] But these are the kinds of crazy things.

Another thing that to me was-- It made a real imprint on me. We had the Cleveland Play House; we were at Thirty-eighth and they were at Eighty-sixth Street. We were all about the same distance from, say, Euclid Avenue. And they were doing an Irish play by Sean O'Casey.

SMITH: Yeah, Sean O'Casey.

WILLIAMS: And the neighborhood was protesting it. For me this was unusual; you see, it was whites against whites. They were throwing rotten tomatoes and eggs. Anything they could throw they threw. It was comparable to-- No, not quite, but actually kind of the feeling you had when you went to the Watts uprisings. There was real protest, real fight, real anger. And this is the first time I had

been exposed to anything like that. I was very impressed. But I think the all over thing was that "My God, there are whites attacking whites. What the hell's the matter with them?" [laughter] I remember when in later years I went to England, and you felt this division of people: you were scum and I was this-- You know what I mean? You had an awful lot of that in England. Even in the lines, I think, waiting to go to the theater, you were very aware of the difference in levels of respect, I guess is a way of putting it. But that was, again-- I remember I wrote home from England and I said, "Gee, Mama, these people are all white and they're fighting each other." [laughter] I couldn't-- I had been the victim here so long that I couldn't conceive of people-- They weren't even different colors and they were fighting each other. The first one I saw was at the Cleveland Play House.

The next one I saw was at the-- What was this thing that happened? Later I lived at the center. I lived there for fourteen years. And I lived over a marionette shop we had. We had a very good marionette shop, very good marionettes. And I lived upstairs over that. Now, what was I going to tell you about? Oh, so I worked all day in the [Playhouse] Settlement [of the Neighborhood Association] and I worked with the children's theater, junior people's theater, and then I performed and worked

with the adult theater at night. I still think we had the greatest children's theater that I've ever seen. And when I said that I suddenly remembered Natalie [Natalia] Satz in Moscow, who has this famous children's theater that I've worked with. But even so we had a very good theater for children. We had a little print shop, and they printed their own programs and their tickets. They used a cashier and sold their tickets. They had ushers, they wrote their plays, they drew their costumes and helped to execute them. And we'd take subjects like-- We had one teacher who was a biologist, and I remember they were doing something on pollywogs to frogs. We did a play about that and did all these costumes of frogs and pollywogs. So we used everything like that.

Upstairs over the poolroom and theater we had a very large art shop. And there Marian Bonsteel, who was the niece, I think, of the Bonsteel Theatre in Detroit man or woman-- And we did everything there. We had things, I guess linoleum block prints and water colors. She was very versatile. She had been a Camp Fire teacher too. She was I think on the executive committee of Camp Fire. And it was funny because I was fighting-- Camp Fire at that time didn't allow blacks in. The Boy Scouts or the Girl Scouts, they didn't allow any blacks in, and we fought that. And finally the Camp Fire Girls were the

ones that accepted it first. Marian, as I said, had been active in Camp Fire work. But she was a great artist. She helped us learn how to design our sets. Because we had limited space you had to do gimmicky kinds of things in order to make it-- Someone came here about two weeks ago and said, "You know, I went back one time and saw that theater and I didn't see how-- The first time I saw it, it looked immense. And then when I went back to see it, it didn't have any space at all." And that's--

If you really know what you're doing you can get really wonderful effects with nothing. It's part of the reason I feel very unhappy about so many young people who have everything and don't know what the hell to do with it. They're so busy working on time clocks and division of work that you never get a togetherness of a whole. I always used to say, you know, in Africa they don't think like that. Here we see a rose, and you separate the petals, and you take a picture of the petals and then of the stem and the thorns. But in Africa you see a melon in a cold running brook of water, and you think, "Mmmmm," and all your taste buds start. You feel the whole, all the sensory organs are tempted, and you almost smell it even though you're not near it. But you can taste it, and "Mmmmm, when I get to that--" You don't just think the skin is rough, you know, you don't think like that. You

think of the whole effect. And that's what we don't do enough of here, I feel. Many times I've been very impatient, but I can come back to that later. I even organized a class in it, I was so upset once. That's funny.

Well, anyway, at Karamu House, almost everyone who wrote "black," who was a black writer, that was the one place they could produce their plays. We did all of Langston Hughes's children's plays.

MASON: I wanted to ask you about that. Langston Hughes lived in Cleveland for a while--

WILLIAMS: Yeah, we were very good friends.

MASON: And he was teaching there, pretty early--

WILLIAMS: At Karamu?

MASON: Yeah, I understand, the children's--

WILLIAMS: Well, we were almost a oneness. Langston Hughes, Zell Ingram, and I, we did many things together. We cooked together, we picnicked together, we found things to write about together. His first trip to the islands I was supposed to go with him and Zell, and my parents said, "But maybe you can't." [laughter] I said, "Can't?" I was probably about fifteen and I didn't understand why I couldn't go. We were very close. I knew his mother and his brother. But Langston, it was what he wanted, to be able to express himself. There was no other place where

he could do this. So we became a family, you know. And this was true. Countee Cullen, we had this kind of a relationship with. Even W. E. B. DuBois would come to us. I met Ethel Waters at Karamu. I met [Charles] Gilpin, who was one of the first black actors on Broadway, in [*The Emperor Jones*]. He did it first, I think. And then we had, oh, you name it, we had them all. There was a man-- what was his name?--he was running for either president or vice president of the United States on the Communist ticket, and he came to see us at the Karamu House. And who else? All of the people like-- Alain Locke came to Karamu and spent time there. But who was the man who used to write a kind of "believe it," not like [Robert L.] Ripley, but what was his name? He spent time with us, and he was very anxious to get historical facts about Negro contributions to the United States. What I'm trying to say, I think, is that we had exposure to some of the best of everything that was happening in black life.

SMITH: Could you give us a little character portrait of Charles Gilpin? What was he like as a man, and to work with, and--?

WILLIAMS: Well, I didn't work with him.

SMITH: Oh, you didn't.

WILLIAMS: He came to Karamu, but I didn't work with him. He worked on Broadway or in the-- What's downtown

Broadway? [It's] not a good day. No, but Charles Gilpin was not a big man, dark brown skin. I remember a very strong chin line, and soft-spoken. I think I was more impressed that he was working on Broadway than anything else. But that's about as much-- You know, we talked together, I knew him. Then many plays came to Karamu, and many times we were the first people to do the plays. We did Countee Cullen's two plays, one that ended up being-- what was it?--the play that found Pearl Bailey. And Carmen de Lavallade and her husband met on that play.

[tape recorder off]

I remember going to Swarthmore [College] one summer. I took a course at Swarthmore. And outside of Swarthmore-- of course that was in Pennsylvania--there was a place called-- Anyway, there was a theater called-- Jasper Deeter's theater. Have you come across it? Jasper Deeter had a playhouse and workshop in some kind of valley they called it, but it was near Chester. The names of all those little towns will maybe come to me. But while I was at Swarthmore that summer, Countee Cullen let me take his place, and I asked Jasper Deeter to read some at Swarthmore. He came over and people said they were so impressed because he made all of his own clothes. And he made his shoes. He had brand-new shoes he made to come to Swarthmore to read this play. So everyone back at his

theater said that he was very impressed if he did that.

But I should tell you a couple of things about Jasper. Jasper was a very good friend of Langston Hughes, and that's how I got all tangled up in it. And Langston said, "You have to come meet him, Frank, you have to come meet him." So this time I took advantage of it. I spent as much time as I could at Jasper's Hedgerow Theatre because this man-- I've been in the audience when-- A bigot I wanted to say, but-- Wealthy, lots of wealthy people lived in that area and, of course, were all white. They would come to the theater and have to sit next to a black person and it disturbed them. I mean, they were disturbed. And this man, maybe playing in a production, would look out and recognize what was happening. He would stop the play and say, "We have plenty of time to wait for that man to get up and go out if he doesn't like my friends who are here." He did this regularly. That's Jasper Deeter, friend of Langston Hughes. He was a wonderful man. He took many, many black people who had talent in Philadelphia to work whenever they needed parts for them, or even created parts for them. He did wonderful children's theater and wonderful adult theater and was very, very imaginative. I've never read much about Jasper Deeter, but there should be tons about him: he was really a great man. And as I said, he even had

influence on Karamu House, the Gilpin Players, or whatever you wish to call them.

SMITH: Can you recall some of the roles that you played, just to give us a taste of the different kinds of characters, the different types of roles you would play in Karamu House?

WILLIAMS: I used to play in almost every play, as well as doing some technical work. I either did costumes or sets or tickets. I did sell-- Everyone had to do several jobs. And I usually cooked for the whole crew too because I lived there. I'd put on a pot of something, stew or beans or spaghetti or something. But I think the thing-- There were so many things I liked doing. Actually, one of the last plays I did there was *Stevedore*. This is a play that really sent me off to the Soviet Union, because I had the last line in that play. I picked up a brick and said, "I got the red-headed son-of-a-bitch." [laughter] Plus the fact that we were arrested for doing that play. They tried to prevent us from having it go on. They brought out the fire department and said we had to put in three or four more doors in the theater. And I think someone had to get me out of jail to play it that night. I mean, there were several other people like that too, that had the same kind of thing happen to them. For a little play, you know? A few plays in such a little house, sixty

people. And they didn't want them exposed to some of the truths of our own history. So I remember *Stevedore*. I loved that part. I loved it.

SMITH: What part were you playing?

WILLIAMS: I played the lead heavy. I don't remember the name, I'd have to read the play again. I'm almost ninety, darling. I just don't remember back that far.

Then Katharine Cornell had done *Scarlet Sister Mary* on Broadway that had lots of acclaim, and we decided to do it. I did *Scarlet Sister Mary* in that, which was really almost a one-woman show, and I loved doing that. My mother came down from Oberlin. We had a kind of homestead in Oberlin, Ohio, then. And Mother came down to, you know, fix dinner for me and keep me going with working all day and all night. She said, "Baby, are you getting along all right?" And I said, "Yeah, you know, the thing's going pretty well, but I just can't get that goddamn prayer, Mother." And she said, "Oh, honey, honey, honey, don't talk about prayers that way." [laughter] And she said, "But I'll pray and you'll get it." [laughter] *Scarlet Sister Mary* was a very important highlight in my-- We did, oh, Countee Cullen's-- We called it *Little Augie*. On Broadway it had another name [*Saint Louis Woman*], but it was about a racehorse rider. *Little Augie* drove the horses in a race. What do they call them?

MASON: Jockeys.

WILLIAMS: Jockey. And he came back with all the colors, the blues and the golds, and what have you. And Festus Fitzhugh played that role, I remember, and we all loved it. The costumes of that period-- Our dressing is sad compared to the kinds of dresses, the satins and the yellows and the blues and the pinks and gold. And cakewalk. If you haven't held yourself in the position of a cakewalk with lots of people, it's just tremendous. Because I saw someone try to do it on television not too long ago, and it was just not done. But my brother could cakewalk, oh. [laughter] We all did. We loved it. We loved the music. We did that, and then it made Broadway. We did the original *Porgy*, without the music.

SMITH: What part did you play in it?

WILLIAMS: I played Serena. We did a very good *Porgy*. And the production-- When they did it, they came out to Cleveland to do it for the Hanna Theatre. And of course, we thought we were their host. It was funny, we were so close to it-- Many times, [you] just can't see. We had a young woman who had just started teaching that year who was acting in our company at Karamu. And she bought a little fur coat. Looked like that dog out there.

MASON: Was this Hazel Mountain Walker?

WILLIAMS: No, it wasn't Hazel. No, Hazel was still a

principal when we had her. This was a young, young girl. And she-- I wish I could remember her name. Anyway, we had laughed at her and said that old coat wasn't anything but goat. And when we went backstage to see Porgy, the goat grabbed her coat. [laughter] And we just fell out because we told her it was goat. He just recognized his brother.

But one of the most embarrassing things that happened to me on that-- I felt so good being backstage, you know, at a real, legit theater production. And when the curtain went down or closed, I don't know which it did, I was on one side of the stage, and I ran across to get to Porgy to tell him how wonderful his performance was. And just as I got halfway across the stage the curtain went up. I had on a raccoon coat [laughter] and all, you know, what you wear for winter. I'll never forget seeing this sea of faces that went on and on and on and on, and I couldn't-- All I could do was, "How the hell do you get to the other side?"

I'd seen Porgy on stage but I'd never seen him standing dressed, you know. And one night we gave this wonderful dinner for them at the Elks club. It was very fancy, and then we danced afterwards. So we were having this dinner and we discovered that there were three Franks sitting at our table, because everyone called me Frank,

and then there was this Frank man who sat next to me, and there was another young actor whose name was Frank something-or-other. So we all said-- You know, [we] had something going, and afterwards I kept looking all this time for Frank Wilson. I don't know why the name didn't come to me. But they'd just arrived in town, you know, and I couldn't find out where the hell the lead in the play was. I looked around and I couldn't find him. So then afterwards, we are between courses or something, we got up to dance, and the music would play. I was dancing with someone and across the room Porgy did one of these things that he does in the play. And I realized the man had been sitting next to me all night. [laughter] But he hadn't done this and I didn't recognize him.

But after that we became very good friends, and a couple of times later when *Porgy* came to town, Mr. Wilson and his wife stayed at our home. It was nice. We kept that relationship going a long time. There were a number of very fine actors: Rose McClendon was in that group, Evelyn--the Evelyn that played Bess--was a fine actress, and Georgia [M.] Burke.

There was another Georgia who was a very famous actor. In New York we used to almost hate her because she'd go down to be interviewed on Monday at the different agencies and would wear a very weather-beaten beret and a

very worn-out coat and plead, "I gotta take care of my old sister, and you have to give me this job." She had all the poker games for all the technicians in theater at her home almost every Saturday night [laughter] and raked in a pot. And so we were always very-- Well, we didn't say nice things about her.

Porgy and Bess we did-- We didn't do *Porgy and Bess*. We did *Porgy*, without music. We did the first one. And then we did the Countee Cullen show that went on Broadway. The play that helped me, I guess, most was Richard B. Harrison's, about heaven.

SMITH: Oh, [*The*] *Green Pastures*.

WILLIAMS: *Green Pastures*. When they came to Cleveland they wanted me to do Noah's wife and they offered me a good salary compared to what a social worker gets.

SMITH: To tour or only in Cleveland?

WILLIAMS: Yes, to go with them, replace someone there. And I would have done it, but my mother-- No, Russell and Rowena said, "Oh Frances, you can't do this." They gave me five raises in one month not to go, so I didn't go. Which reminds me, when I finally went to the Soviet [Union] to study theater, they had to hire five more people too. [laughter]

SMITH: Which Langston Hughes plays were you in?

WILLIAMS: I never was in one of Langston's. He did

several plays that landed on Broadway with Mercedees-- Not McCambridge. [Mercedees Welcher] [tape recorder off] I can't even remember what I directed of children's plays there.

MASON: Did you do any plays from, say, W. E. B. DuBois's *Brownie Book*?

WILLIAMS: No.

MASON: I know that there were some plays by Willis Richardson.

WILLIAMS: No, I think they were written later.

SMITH: Did you know Willis Richardson?

WILLIAMS: No, I didn't. I know about him, but I didn't know him.

SMITH: I gather the Karamu House put on a couple of his plays?

WILLIAMS: I think they did, but I just know his name.

MASON: How did you choose the plays that you wanted to put on?

WILLIAMS: There wasn't much to choose. We didn't have a selection. You hoped that people would get some plays to you. And we were always searching for plays. They were very difficult to find.

MASON: Well, specifically, it was hard to find plays with black subjects.

WILLIAMS: That's right. Or anything that could be, you

know, used or switched to a black production. I think we did some Gilbert and Sullivan too. I'm trying to think of some of the other plays we did there. There must have been at least eighty-five productions that I participated in in that interim.

SMITH: Was it mostly contemporary work, or did you do Shakespeare or--?

WILLIAMS: Oh, no, no, no. We didn't do any Shakespeare, I think. We tried to get plays that were of indigenous people, like South Carolina or-- No, most of the things were rather current, I think, subjects.

I remember-- I wasn't in this scene, but I'll never forget. It's funny, I guess it's important to save the satisfaction you get out of seeing things done. But there was this scene about a black man who died and went to heaven. This was a dream that a man had. He went to heaven and he was being served all this food, you know, with the silver covers, and it was just elegant. And as he was having one of these silver covers lifted from the dish that was being served to him, he looked up and saw this white man who was the waiter. Of course it was a reverse situation, you see, and he said to him, "You know, man, God must have ran out of color when he got to you." And I always thought that was hilariously funny. I don't know why, but I did. [laughter] And that was a very

popular play.

Now, let's see, what else, what other plays that we did. We did a number of plays that went on to Broadway. They may have changed the form some, but they were started at Karamu. I was talking about something else, I don't know what. What was the Richard B. Harrison play? Was there anything else in that that I didn't talk about?

SMITH: *Green Pastures*. Did you do *In Abraham's Bosom*?

WILLIAMS: Yes, we did *In Abraham's Bosom*. We repeated it. It was very popular.

TAPE NUMBER: II, SIDE TWO

MARCH 25, 1992

WILLIAMS: On Broadway for him, and he did-- Vinette Carroll, the director, did her first play on Broadway. It was a Christmas play. It was horrible, I'll never forget. He wrote me a note and said, "Fran, please come and bring--" I think I have the letter. "Please come and bring your amen-shoutin' friends." [laughter] That was a dreadful Christmas play.

SMITH: Well, who was your audience? You said you had a sixty-seat theater.

WILLIAMS: Packed.

SMITH: Always packed.

WILLIAMS: We had a sustaining-- They were sold for the whole year, the whole season.

SMITH: Did you play every night, or four nights?

WILLIAMS: We did six plays a year. And we played weekends.

SMITH: Weekends. So Thursday through Sunday, something like that?

WILLIAMS: Yeah, to accommodate the sixty people.

MASON: Were these mostly middle-class, say, black middle-class people?

WILLIAMS: Yes, [I] think so. For a while we didn't have

as many blacks, but it grew. And it grew because of the kind of-- When we did the play I told you about, the Countee Cullen play--

SMITH: *Little Augie?*

WILLIAMS: *Augie.* We went through the neighborhood into the trunks and the attics of people and got the costumes. That started involving the people into the things we were doing. And from that play on we always had a crowded house of blacks. They could participate and make a contribution towards it.

SMITH: Did you have a sense of audience preference for drama or comedy or--?

WILLIAMS: Oh, we were so good they liked whatever we did, ha, ha, ha, ha. [laughter] I think people liked it; it was a new experience for most people. I'll tell you one thing that actually came out of Karamu. Shirley Graham wrote a play. You know who Shirley Graham was? Shirley Graham was DuBois's last wife.

SMITH: Oh.

WILLIAMS: Shirley went to Oberlin College and did graduate work in theater. And she did this one play that we liked very much. We liked it so much we suggested that she write it into an opera, which she worked at and did. We had just opened this big out-of-door opera season in summer in Cleveland, and of course all of our people were

working there. They accepted Shirley's play as one of the six operas to do, three or six, whatever number they did. And Jules [Julius] Bledsoe was a black opera singer, very talented man, great ability. He played, he did everything. He had a home up in Bucks County [Pennsylvania]. It was where many of the artists lived at one time.

I should tell you a story about Bledsoe. He was a great guy. He had the lead in our opera, and the name of it will come to me soon. Ernst Lert, who was the brother-in-law of-- What is "A rose is a rose is a rose"? Do you remember that famous writer?

MASON: Not Gertrude Stein?

WILLIAMS: Yes. He was a brother-in-law of Gertrude Stein. His wife was Gertrude's sister. Ernst Lert was directing this opera. He was a great conductor and opera director. I remember one night towards the end of the rehearsal period, he was so excited about the results he had been able to accomplish that he got to the end of it, and he said, "Blackout!" And everyone just stood, because they didn't know what to do. They were all blacks! [laughter] They didn't know whether to run or what to do.

Then I remember just about a week or two before we were finished, I mean during the rehearsal period, Ernst Lert said to Bledsoe that the man that was going to sing this in *Werther*--it was an opera, German--had taken ill,

or didn't want to do it, so anyway, they didn't have the lead for it. He said to Jules, "Jules, do you know that opera?" And he said, "No." He said, "I wish you could replace him." Jules said, "Do you have the script?" He said, "Yes, I do." Jules said, "Well, let me have it. I have a piano in my suite at the hotel." And this man, he was all round everywhere. I mean, he was round with his tummy, he had a round face, and he had this round Panama hat that rolled, you know, the brim rolled up. You could make a lot of circles and get Jules. [laughter] But he was able. He took that script of that opera home and came back Monday, and he had it under his belt. He was able. You have great pride in that. It's a new kind of experience for black people to have. It was just great. He was a wonderful man, and we became quite good friends after that.

I remember-- [laughter] I'm sorry, but I have to remember and laugh. Anyway, they were doing a play on Broadway called *All God's Chillun [Got Wings]*, I think. We did that too, I think. Anyway, Jules was given the lead in this play on Broadway. And Rose McClendon and Georgia Burke were the next to the leads. Well, Jules was so happy at having this happen. It meant that his name would be up in lights on Broadway at the top of, oh, everyone, you know. So Jules took a taxi the night of the

opening from his house and directed the cab driver to take him to I guess Broadway, but anyway, a street that as far as he could see, he could see his name in lights. He took this taxi and sat his round self back and went down that road in his taxi and he kept looking and looking and looking, and he couldn't see anything. Finally he got to the theater and [his] name wasn't there, but Georgia Burke's was there, and the other woman's was there. You know what he did? He got right to the theater and told the cab driver, "Now take me back home." And he went back home, because these hussies had decided that they had been on Broadway longer than Jules and had had a big fight with the director or whoever was in charge or the producer in charge of the play and convinced him that their names should be up there, not Jules's. And Jules said, "Well damn it, do it yourself." [laughter] But he told me this in a bar in New York years later. Oh, he was a charming man, brilliant, able. He invited me up to Bucks County, I remember, after that. But he made me very proud when he walked out with that *Werther*. He said, "I'll be back," and he came back. There were so many other plays. We did lots of things that were really revolutionary.

SMITH: Did you do Wallace Thurman's *Harlem*? Do you recall? Did you know Wallace Thurman?

WILLIAMS: Wally Thurman?

SMITH: Yeah.

WILLIAMS: I knew him well. I brought him out here for UCLA the first time when they decided they would have a black recognition day like we have in February. They did it for one day at UCLA first. We had to fight to get that, and then we couldn't find a speaker that they'd accept. Wally had a church up in San Francisco. You know, he was a minister.

SMITH: No, I didn't know that.

MASON: I didn't know that.

WILLIAMS: Oh, Wally Thurman, yes. Oh, I could tell you lots of stories about Wally, and I knew his wife. His wife helped to desegregate the YWCAs [Young Women's Christian Associations] and the YMCAs [Young Men's Christian Associations] in the South. Oh, God. Anyway, Wally Thurman came to UCLA, and I'll never forget that night. It was the first night-- I also got the O'Neil Choir. They're very famous now. They've played Europe so much they've gone white. [laughter] I mean they don't play-- The music doesn't sound black to me anymore.

MASON: About what time?

WILLIAMS: Now. They still are.

MASON: I mean when Wallace Thurman was at UCLA.

WILLIAMS: Well, it was just before we started having a week of--

MASON: Black history.

WILLIAMS: Uh-huh, black history. I'd like to know that time: if you look it up, let me know what that time was. This man spoke, and when he spoke, he had the art of using a pause that was miraculous. He could say "So-and-so and so-and-so [long pause]--" What got into you when he got a pause like that was unlike--

MASON: A born minister.

WILLIAMS: It was something. See, UCLA thought that when we got Wally that he would-- He was a minister, you know, and he'd be a nice man. [laughter] They never had such a whipping as they got from this man. He was perfect. He was just perfect. I better make notes on that for myself.

SMITH: Did you know Jean Toomer?

WILLIAMS: Jean Toomer?

SMITH: Right.

WILLIAMS: Vaguely, but I knew all the Quakers in that area at that time. I knew Jessie [Redmon] Fauset and Mary Bryant. I did my first airplane ride with Mary Bryant's brother.

SMITH: Oh.

WILLIAMS: We had an open plane, an open two-seater plane. [laughter] Oh God. Oh, that's funny. You shouldn't take me back to those places.

SMITH: You know, there were some sort of technical things

I wanted to ask you about the productions, and some to get a sense of the kind of--which you've gone into a little bit--but the kind of colors that you used. Because you know, when you look at production stills they're always in black and white.

WILLIAMS: Oh, that's true. I'm very aware of the fact that we tried to use nature colors, not flower colors, but earth colors like oranges and sand and mahoganies, warm kind of a-- Usually these are the colors we'd drape things in and used as much of in costumes. Usually we were concerned about how things draped on you, so that it had to have weight enough to make a drape. Except when we did things like *Porgy*, then you went in for lots of color.

SMITH: Did the lighting tend to be high-contrast or more even? Do you recall how you handled the lighting?

WILLIAMS: What did we do? Of course it was the only lighting I'd ever tried. Well, we just tried for the effect that seemed right to us. We did a lot of things with skylines and I can see us cutting cardboard for the shrubbery and the lights behind it on the floor.

[laughter] Oh, I remember learning it when I learned about cycloramas. They never had a wrinkle in them; they were tight and taut.

SMITH: How deep was your stage?

WILLIAMS: Two inches. [laughter] No, it wasn't very

deep. I doubt if it was thirty feet. And the ropes, of course-- One interesting thing we did, I think, is that we used drums to announce the opening of the curtain instead of bells. That's when we got a lot of that, because we were into that African thing. And I think I told you, didn't I, that this was the first group that I know of that sent money to Africa to bring back artifacts for the art museum [Cleveland Museum of Art]. I told you that didn't I?

SMITH: Yes.

MASON: The infamous artist, Paul [B.] Travis--?

WILLIAMS: Yeah.

MASON: Was he white or black?

WILLIAMS: White.

MASON: Yeah, that's what I thought.

WILLIAMS: Paul Bough Travis.

SMITH: How about music? What kind of music did you use?

Was it original? I guess it had to be live--

WILLIAMS: Some of it was.

SMITH: --at that time.

WILLIAMS: And we used mostly guitars, I think. They didn't have keyboards-- We [did] have a piano because we had more music for the cakewalk.

SMITH: Yeah, and you had musicals of course.

WILLIAMS: Yeah, yeah, we had some musicals, so we had to

have musicians. If we did they were in that first room.

[laughter]

SMITH: It would not have been a large orchestra though?

WILLIAMS: Oh, no, no, no, we couldn't have done that.

SMITH: What about for dramatic plays and nonmusical plays? What kind of music would you use, or would you use any?

WILLIAMS: If we did, we'd sing either a cappella or with guitar, I would say, or drum.

SMITH: No music. Well, simple music.

WILLIAMS: Unless it was--

SMITH: Were your sets--? Did they tend--? I mean, I realize that it would vary from play to play, but do you think that your sets tended to be abstract or tended to be realistic?

WILLIAMS: Realistic. Mostly realistic, I would say.

SMITH: There's another question I wanted to ask you which has to do with-- A lot of the plays that were written at that time about black life were written in, quote, unquote, "dialect," or "stage dialect."

WILLIAMS: Oh, God, it was awful.

SMITH: How did you handle that?

WILLIAMS: Difficultly. It was not easy. You know, why the hell don't they just write straight and let you do what you want to do with it? But they were not easy, and

at that time when people wrote for blacks they wrote in their idea of dialect, which was awful. It was really awful. We did a Gullah play. What was the name of that that I liked very much? We did a group of three, and I remember I had to work to carry a pail on my head and one in each hand and walk. And I worked and I worked and I worked and I worked and I worked to do that. And one day I was in New York and I saw this island woman going up a slope like so with this enamel dishpan that had a fifty-pound piece of ice or twenty-five-pound piece of ice and all of her groceries around it. Just on her head walking up this hill in New York! And I said to the person who was there, "Pardon me, but go over there and stop." And I went to her and I said, "How in the hell are you doing that? I worked so hard to try and do it." She says, "Just one of God's talents. Always, my dear, if you have one talent given to you by God, use it, or you lose it." [laughter] The most charming woman, straight and tall, this big pan on her head, just nothing. I had really labored to get that darn thing going. Then of course we didn't have much height. With curtains it was not easy to do.

SMITH: With the Gullah play, did you have to--? I mean, you studied Gullah in order to--

WILLIAMS: We had to. We did lots with patois and Gullah

and many different dialects and languages.

MASON: The interest in Gullah, was that something that the group found out about and initiated or was that an interest of, say, Rowena Jelliffe's? How much influence did she have on the productions and the choice of plays?

WILLIAMS: She had a great deal because she was really the only one there who knew much about theater. You spoke of Mountain Walker. She was very interested and knew how to get research work done and find out a lot of things.

Hazel Mountain Walker. Funny, I slipped into something I don't want to slip into. Now, this is a thing that disturbed me a great deal, and that was that Russell and Rowena would go to New York and take a six-week course in theater. They never suggested once that we take it. They never even taught us. We had to pick up what we learned. I resented this, I thought it was just damned racist. But I thought later-- When I tried to get into a school for acting theater, you know, a place to study, I had a very difficult time in New York. And that's why I went to the Soviet Union. Even [Erwin] Piscator at the New School for Social Research-- When I went there to try and get in that school at that time, they just walked around me and then told me, "We don't have any material for you, so we can't take you." I couldn't find a place to study.

SMITH: Even Piscator.

WILLIAMS: Isn't that shocking.

SMITH: Yeah.

WILLIAMS: They just opened about a year or two before. And it's interesting because later one of his best friends who wrote with him became a very good friend of mine out here, a couple of his friends. They were from German theater. And I remember-- I started to say-- You see, I have a chair that belonged to [Bertolt] Brecht when he was out here studying. They gave it to me when he left. He was all part of that crowd, but I couldn't get in. I didn't know them then, but it was interesting that we became friends later. And I remember when I came through East Germany one time, he had just died, and his wife wrote a special letter for me saying anytime I had time, I was supposed to be in the theater. I could always get in the theater. I thought that was nice of her.

SMITH: Yeah.

WILLIAMS: And that was an interesting experience at that theater. It was a great theater.

SMITH: The Berliner Ensemble?

WILLIAMS: Uh-huh, uh-huh, I loved it. God, theater where you take time to do anything you want to. Take time, whoo! Such perfectionists. And simple.

SMITH: About how much rehearsal time did you have at the Karamu House?

WILLIAMS: It averaged about six weeks.

SMITH: So standard--

WILLIAMS: Uh-huh. It was interesting. Later, I'll say about three or four years ago--I may have told you this--I was in Cleveland doing a television show. Did I tell you?

SMITH: No.

WILLIAMS: I was doing a morning breakfast show from *Frank's Place*, because I was in *Frank's Place* at the time. They arranged it. The manager I had there arranged it for me. And Rowena Jelliffe then was ninety-six years old and spent the entire day with me. She came for the breakfast club meeting on television, and then they had the green room filled with people who wanted to interview me. I was being interviewed by some woman, I forgot, I wish I knew, but she was interviewing me. She was saying something, and I gave her my answer, and Rowena said, "Oh no, Frances, you wouldn't say it that way. Wouldn't you say--?" I said, "Rowena, I agreed with you when I had to. Today, this is my interview, and I do not agree with you." [laughter]

MASON: Oh. [laughter]

WILLIAMS: It's interesting, isn't it? You don't realize what's happening with you through life and the contradictions and the position-- I had a paramount chief from Africa here one time, and he had written some very

important books that I wanted so much to read. And he said, "Yes, but I have to change them. You see, I wouldn't have gotten a degree if I hadn't written some of these things that they wanted me to say." Another time I had-- Where did this happen? In the islands, I was somewhere. [Melville J.] Herskovits. Remember Herskovits, the anthropologist?

SMITH: Melville Herskovits, yeah.

WILLIAMS: He had been there, where I was, and I said something to them. I said, "You didn't tell Herskovits that." And they said, "No." They said, "You see, if we told them all we know, they'd know what we know and they know too." [laughter] I'm always kind of amused at that. But it's good to know, you know. People don't always tell you the truth, and it's to their credit. I had a lecture at UCLA with another anthropologist and I told this story. She was so busy bragging. She was an anthropologist. I said, "You don't know a damn thing, do you? You don't know what they told you and what was true and what wasn't." [laughter] I'm bad.

MASON: I guess I just had one burning question.

WILLIAMS: What?

MASON: I don't know if you know about this or not. It's about Langston Hughes and Zora Neale Hurston and the whole controversy over "Mule Bone: [A Comedy of Negro Life]."

WILLIAMS: Want to hear a little bit about Zora?

MASON: Okay.

WILLIAMS: It's a little complex, this question you ask, because you know it's like looking at the elephant and it's according to which end of it you grab. The woman who gave out most of the information on Zora and Langston was a kind of secretary for the woman who was their--

MASON: Mason? Charlotte Mason, their patron?

WILLIAMS: Yes. Patron was the word I wanted. And see, they too were-- For people who were, I want to say phoney, but they were kind of phoney, it was hard for them to take Zora. Zora was so honest and so straightforward. When she was here lecturing she never straightened her hair. She wore gingham dresses. She did her lectures in dialect at UCLA. She invited you to her home and she served you greens and ham and sweet potato pie and beets, you know, or watermelon.

MASON: Oh. [laughter]

WILLIAMS: She was a courageous woman, and we had some long talks. She never-- But these other people were so busy aping whites, because they thought that's where it was, and many people still do it until they have lost themselves in the process. But oh, I've had so much of it, so much of it.

Now they're saying a lot of things about Langston

that I didn't believe at all, until-- Because I was very close to him for a long time. Even after he went to New York I was very close to Langston. His mother used to come, and I couldn't stand his mother. She exploited him for everything she could. And his brother was always getting in trouble and he was getting him out of jail or something. He had a rough life, and he didn't have time for the kind of foolishness that people are trying to accuse him of. But a great guy. We had a lot of fun. What was the rest of your question?

MASON: Well, there was a big controversy over "Mule Bone," that they were-

WILLIAMS: Zora and Lang?

MASON: Yeah.

WILLIAMS: I remember Lang told me, though, that he was somewhere-- How did it go? Oh, at Zora's house. And he picked up the book, and the top of it said something about "Written by Zora Neale Hurston." And as he went through the book, it was his book, the whole thing. [laughter] The whole thing was his book, but Zora had appropriated it or-- You know, I'm sure that's what had happened. But she needed it for a reason, I'm sure. [laughter] Yeah, they did have that, but he just howled. He didn't, you know, jump back salty or all the things that people might have done, it's true. That book story I know because Langston

told me about it when it happened.

But I was reading-- We were in Laguna Beach and there was a black family there that did catering, and this friend of mine would go down-- It was Carmen de Lavallade's aunt. What was her name? Beautiful woman. It will come to me. And on the coffee table was this book, and it had-- It was high school literature, you know, stories from different writers, and in it was one story written by Zora Neale Hurston. And while I was sitting there I read it, and it was so-- I thought it was such a good story. We were all sitting at dinner and people were kind of talking about things and I said, "You know, I read a story the other day I think you might like to hear." So I told the story. And they just howled. They loved it. And the woman said, "Tell me, where did you get that story?" And I said to her, "Off your coffee table." [laughter] And she had had it since she'd been in high school and had never read it. It was a good story. I'll tell it to you later.

SMITH: Did you ever have the chance to see the Crigwa Players? Did they ever come to Cleveland or did you go to Washington?

WILLIAMS: Yes, isn't that a group--?

SMITH: It was in D.C. and W. E. B. DuBois started it in 1926.

WILLIAMS: No, I don't think-- There's a group that sounds like that that I met at the National Black Theater Festival in Winston-Salem a couple of years ago.

SMITH: Oh, well, maybe they borrowed the name.

WILLIAMS: They could have. They did some very interesting, wonderful things.

SMITH: Did you ever get to see the Hapgood Players?

WILLIAMS: No. No, we stayed pocketed in Cleveland.

SMITH: Did other black theater groups come? Did they tour?

WILLIAMS: Only the things like the Broadway shows.

But no little theater groups.

SMITH: So you didn't have-- Except for seeing Jasper Deeter's--

WILLIAMS: No, no network.

SMITH: --you didn't have a chance to share work then?

WILLIAMS: No, no.

SMITH: That's too bad.

WILLIAMS: Uh-huh. We had a lot to exchange. But we didn't know. And then you had distance. You didn't have, you know-- Planes weren't running until '30 something, I think. A long time. My wedding present from my first husband [George Ferguson] was in '34. I got my first plane ride. And that was sort of breaking the ice then.

SMITH: Well, I did want to ask you about a couple of the

individuals who were involved with Karamu House. Like you've mentioned Hazel Mountain Walker. She was a theatrical person?

WILLIAMS: No, she was a principal of an elementary school.

SMITH: Oh, okay.

WILLIAMS: They were all working people in the community.

SMITH: What about Pearl Mitchell?

WILLIAMS: Pearl Mitchell was very active with our group. And she had been at Wilberforce [University]. And then I think she finished it, did her graduate work at Wilberforce or something, and then she came to Cleveland. Her family lived there. She had a handsome brother, and Pearl was quite a woman. Yeah, I liked Pearl. Pearl came out here to see me several times. One time, we were coming from Mexico and the man at the border said, "Do you have any fruit?" I had taken down grapefruit and oranges and stuff, and we'd rented a little house or something. And Pearl said, "Oh, we have some grapefruit and some oranges." And he said, "Well, you can't take those, madam." She said, "Well, what will we do with them?" He said, "I don't know, lady, eat 'em! Here's a box of them." She said, "I won't throw these away. I will eat them." And so we sat on the border while Pearl Mitchell ate the damn oranges and grapefruit, and then when she got

all these peelings and seeds she said to him, "What shall I do with these?" [laughter] He said, "Oh wait, lady," and he got this trash box and said, "Throw them in here." [laughter] You know, it's funny. You see, when you bring up names there are so many things that go through your mind, it's very difficult to keep-- But I'll never forget Pearl. "My dear, throw these away?" What else, baby?

MASON: Did you know Curtis Tann?

WILLIAMS: Oh, did I. He came to the Playhouse [Settlement] after I left. He's very ill now, you know.

MASON: Yeah.

WILLIAMS: He and his wife [Ethel Henderson Tann] were two of the people they hired to--

SMITH: Two of five people?

WILLIAMS: --to replace me.

SMITH: What about Elmer Cheeks?

WILLIAMS: Oh yes, Elmer, dear Elmer, he was a part of our group. And he was kind of the businessman or something. He had a gasoline station and he married-- No, his sister married the owner of a gasoline station. What did Elmer do? I've forgotten. My God, Elmer Cheeks.

SMITH: You've alluded to why you left, but maybe we should talk about why you left. What made you decide to leave at the time that you did?

WILLIAMS: What, to go to the--? To leave Karamu?

SMITH: To leave Karamu, right. You'd been there fourteen years, I think.

WILLIAMS: Yeah, I was the only resident worker. Many things happened. What really pulled the trigger-- I think Stevedore had a lot to do with it. And then the Jelliffes took me to Workers School in Cleveland. And I had never been to a place like that before. I'd never been anywhere except Cleveland and a couple of cities. But they stayed two weeks, and I went on. That's what did it. And then I was doing so much work politically there. We had a group called the Future Outlook League that we developed, because blacks had no businesses of their own. We would try to set them up in business but realized they didn't have a chance to learn the business. So then we developed a whole apprentice course in banks and produce companies and everything you can think of. And when they learned the business, then we set them up in business. We got the money together to set them up. Well, that was just one of the kind of activities that I did. At that time there were very few Democrats because blacks had always been Republicans coming up from the South. And I helped develop the Democratic Party in Cleveland. When I left, there were six black people on the council. Then later [Carl] Stokes came in as one of the first black mayors. So we did some good work.

SMITH: How did the Depression affect you and your family?

WILLIAMS: I was away most of the time.

SMITH: Pardon?

WILLIAMS: I left for Europe.

SMITH: But you left in '32, right?

WILLIAMS: I left in '34.

SMITH: 'Thirty-four, okay. But during the depth of the Depression you were still at Karamu House. Did it affect the Jelliffes?

WILLIAMS: Yeah, but I had been-- Nothing affected the Jelliffes moneywise. He built a new home in Shaker Heights [Ohio], and they had a son born. They were fine people, but they didn't know they were racist too. Few of us do, you know.

MASON: Someone told me they got support, financial support, from Hollywood that might have helped them.

WILLIAMS: Who?

MASON: The Jelliffes.

WILLIAMS: Oh, no.

MASON: Someone told me that Rowena studied with Bette Davis. That's not true?

WILLIAMS: Might have, I don't know. I don't know anything about it. I told you they did a lot of studying that we didn't know anything about.

MASON: Yeah.

WILLIAMS: But they never made way for us to study. That's the part I didn't like. We had to find it the hardest way. Part of the thing, too, that helped me go away was I-- Oh, I know what affected me in the Depression. Our men had no work.

SMITH: Yeah.

WILLIAMS: You see, and I was living at Thirty-ninth and Central. And these men didn't want to be at home all day long with their wives and children and no income. And I devised-- I was a girls worker who never did anything. You know, they separated in settlements and social setups: the women took care of women and children, and the men social workers took care of women and children.

SMITH: Men and children.

WILLIAMS: I mean men and children. Well, maybe they did the other too. [laughter] But anyway, I took seven husbands and built a fathers club. I had a mothers club-- Oh God, you shouldn't take me to these places. Too many thoughts come in. But I had this fathers club of seven people and I developed it into three hundred men. We had to buy another building to house them because they were there every day and night. You see, we had developed a full program. I taught them speech, you know, and how to discuss current events. All the important speakers, all the people that were running politically, they were

exposed to and they could question and make decisions. We didn't tell them how to vote, but they were exposed to it. And A. Philip Randolph-- That's where I met A. Philip Randolph. He came to that group. He was having a fight then with the AF of L [American Federation of Labor] on the Pullman porter. And there was a great controversy about whether or not we should have a separate black union. Oh, some of those conversations and arguments I wish I'd taped. They didn't have tapes then, but they would have been very interesting to hear. So I had it all, but that kind of thing-- I remember the first time I went to the Soviet Union they were celebrating a-- Stakhanovite? It's a man who anyone who in seven years-- SMITH: [Aleksei Grigorevich] Stakhanov.

WILLIAMS: Stakhanovite.

SMITH: Yeah, the Stakhanovite, hero workers.

WILLIAMS: Yes, that's right. Well, this man had done it, picked more cotton or done something with more cotton than anyone else. And they were having a big celebration for these people that had done this kind of thing. And the people that were the hosts were the writers and the artists of the Soviet Union. And they were giving, you know, big banquets. What do you call the stuff with the little turkey, ham, and--? What do you call it, sturgeon,

sturgeon--?

SMITH: Oh, caviar?

WILLIAMS: Caviar.

TAPE NUMBER: III, SIDE ONE

APRIL 1, 1992

SMITH: I wanted to get clear on the chronology of your leaving to go to the Soviet Union to study. The last thing that you said on tape was that when you were in Stevedore, that pushed you. But then off tape last time, you said there were personal things in your life that also were factors, such as your marriage.

WILLIAMS: The things that bothered me most-- Let's see what happened. I got married in '33, and in '34 I asked the lawyer to give me a divorce on the same date.

[laughter]

SMITH: A year later.

WILLIAMS: A year later. And then that year I went to Mexico. And then I went to the Soviet Union.

SMITH: Was that your first time outside the United States when you went to Mexico?

WILLIAMS: [I'm] trying to remember. Probably. I think so. Yes, I think so. But I didn't-- I was very frustrated because everywhere I went to study theater, they wouldn't accept me because at that time they based it on the problem that they have no plays for blacks. And I even went to [Erwin] Piscator.

SMITH: Piscator, right, you mentioned that.

WILLIAMS: Yeah, you know, [the] New School [for] Social Research, they just walked around me and said, "We have nothing for you." The thing that was so interesting was that years later out in Hollywood, that whole core of people from Germany-- I'd said that didn't I?

SMITH: Yeah.

WILLIAMS: We all became quite good friends. But anyway, at this time I was really upset, because I told you the Jelliffes [Rowena and Russell W.] had never pushed us for training, and that disturbed me. Langston [Hughes] is the one who came to me and we talked together about it. And he said, "Fran, you know"--Frank, he called me--he said, "Frank, you know, there's a world writers congress coming this year to New York. I think what you ought to do is go to the congress and see if you can find someone there from the Soviet [Union] who's interested in theater." And that's what I did. So when the writers congress started assembling in the United States, I went to New York, and I found out where one of the writers was staying. And it was Friedrich [August] Wolf.

SMITH: Oh, right.

WILLIAMS: [He] wrote [*The*] *Sailors of Cattaro* and lots of things.

SMITH: And *Cyanide*.

WILLIAMS: Yes, yes. I went to the hotel, and they did

the same thing. These men kept coming downstairs and walking all around me. [laughter] I thought, "What is this?" Finally one came up to me and said, "Pardon me, but are you looking for Friedrich Wolf?" And I said, "Yes, I am." He said, "You?" I said, "I wish to see him." So he said, "All right, follow me." So the three of us went up the elevator and we went to his suite. Do you know that we talked for over three hours? We put all the pictures of Soviet Union plays and his plays and his books-- And I had some things from Karamu [House], and we really talked theater for over three hours sitting on the floor in his suite. He said, "Oh, you must come to the Soviet [Union]." And I said, "Well, I'd like to, I think." So we worked out possible dates, and he said, "I will meet you there, and that will be that." I thought, "Well, isn't that wonderful."

So I came back home and started selling everything. We didn't have refrigerators or televisions back then, but I had Victrolas and I used to collect tables, antique tables. I had everything in tables from altars--Catholic churches--to poker tables. Do you know what a poker table is? It's a kind of an oblong table and it's like two planks with an opening like this so they can cross boards underneath to put their chips in, the poker chips, their money, and each one has a section. I bought, I think,

about eight of these one day, and then we painted them. I had a cabinetmaker who would go over the very good ones and then we'd paint them. I remember I painted all of these tables on the underside of the opening a different color from the rest of the table and gave them to young people for homework and school. They were really very gay and delightful. I had some cherry wood tables and mahogany tables with drop leafs and leafs that went up the back, all sorts. I sold everything that I could turn into money. When I finished I had enough for a round-trip ticket and \$78 left over. [laughter] And I've often thought, I don't think I've ever gone from here to San Francisco with so little.

SMITH: How long were you planning on staying?

WILLIAMS: I didn't know anything. I knew nothing, I just-- And alone.

SMITH: What did your family feel about your going off to Russia?

WILLIAMS: I do everything alone. Well, they didn't-- The Russians didn't mean anything to my family. They didn't know what it was all about. They just knew I was gone again. I started, I told you, when I was sixteen, going, and I never stopped. But when I went to-- Did I tell you about going down to Mexico?

SMITH: No.

MASON: Can I ask you a question before that? You had met all this discouragement, in a way. There didn't seem to be any parts for black actresses, etc., and yet you were still determined to continue in the theater. What made you so determined to continue to do things?

WILLIAMS: I was a nut.

MASON: Okay. [laughter]

WILLIAMS: I was a nut, and I could focus well on what I wanted to do. I think I must have always. I never had difficulty making decisions, you know, and I knew that I would execute them. I always felt this, from the age of fourteen or before. There was an older woman who I helped get her divorce so she could go to New York to study nursing. And I got her a job. I was then in charge of a pantry in Cleveland, and I did sandwiches and desserts. Her husband beat her. He was an engineer, but he was a cruel man. And I was afraid that he'd kill her, you know. I said, "Well, this doesn't make sense." I'd stand outside the window and he'd just be beating her up. So we decided she would go to New York and study nursing. I got her a job where I was working and we both worked to get enough money to get her to New York. And actually I was staying with her when I went to see Friedrich Wolf in New York, because that's where I always stayed. Why did I tell you that? And she, of course, was a very dear friend

of Langston's. We all were; that was a little clique.

But Langston, he was so helpful. Do you know what he did? When he found out I was actually going-- He was going from New York to Chicago. And when he got to Chicago and heard I was on my way to the Soviet Union, he turned around and came back to Cleveland and said, "Frank, if you're going, and I'm glad you're going, but I have a big checking account there, and I'll turn the whole thing over to you because I can't use it, and I can't take the money out of the country." So money was no problem. Wasn't that wonderful? But that's what he did. I loved him. He was a great man. But I was going to tell you that I thought I was kind of set. And I got to the Soviet Union, and Friedrich Wolf was in another country. Here I am with two words from Berlitz and very little money, and I didn't know anyone.

SMITH: You arrived in Leningrad?

WILLIAMS: Yes, Leningrad, and then from there to Moscow. But I knew no one. It was the craziest thing. But it didn't worry me. What did I do? I found-- There were two black school teachers there from either Hampton [Institute] or some school. They had been on a strike and they lost their jobs. They had been in the Soviet [Union] for two or three months, and at that time housing was very bad. There was just no space available. And they said,

"I don't know what you're going to do, kid, but you know you can't get a house here. You can't get an apartment here." Do you know that in less than two weeks I had three offers. One was Irving [R.] Levine, the newspaper man, the journalist, in Washington. Very famous, one of the oldest-- He had a modern apartment in Moscow, an electric kitchen and, I mean, really very smart. And I liked it. He said I could use it. Then someone else offered me an apartment. But the girl at the Meyerhold Theatre who was the set designer-- She did mostly sets, she did costumes too sometimes that went with the set. Her name was Vera Verishka.

MASON: Was she married to Lloyd Patterson, the black--?

WILLIAMS: That's right, that's right.

MASON: He was there at that time.

WILLIAMS: Yes, yes, they'd come over about--

MASON: 'Thirty-two, I think it was with Langston Hughes--

WILLIAMS: A little ahead. Yeah, with Langston and Louise Patterson.

SMITH: So she was American, Vera?

WILLIAMS: No, no, no, no, Lloyd was. Her two sons were here with me about a year ago.

MASON: Oh.

WILLIAMS: I taught the youngest one, I guess, his first Russian because that's how I learned it. [laughter] But

I decided to stay with them, and they had two big rooms in a newer apartment. At that time, you lived in a corner; they called them corners. In one corner someone would live, and in another corner of a room someone would live, and that's the way it worked. Then they had this big bedroom with a bed for the child and a large bed for themselves and books and things. Lloyd Patterson played very good piano and sang. [He] had lots of charisma. And Vera was rare, she should have-- In America she would have probably been a comedian. She was all angles. She spoke very fast and was delightful.

SMITH: Was her last name Vernesova?

WILLIAMS: I don't remember now her last name because we always called her Vera Patterson.

SMITH: Right.

WILLIAMS: Her mother was the one who created the babushka. The doll that goes over the peak of the teapot, you know, to keep it warm? With the big skirt? Well, that was one of her mother's contributions to our culture in the Soviet [Union]. Her father was a physician and a doctor and he got killed in the revolutionary war. But she told us about winters that were so cold, and they were without fuel. They had to burn his books, his precious books, one by one to keep warm. And her mother taught me so many things. She taught me how to make pastry, you

know, with butter, and pat it and so many things. We got a good crowd together because I was working in the theater. Wayland Rudd was there, and at that time there must have been about five or six blacks in the Soviet Union, men. They didn't want you to go out with a Russian, and the Russians didn't want you to go out with the blacks.

MASON: The black men were all married to Russian women, most of them.

WILLIAMS: Not all of them.

MASON: Oh.

WILLIAMS: Not all of them. I found a few who weren't.

[laughter]

MASON: Who were they married to?

WILLIAMS: They weren't married.

MASON: Okay, so they had Russian girlfriends, anyway.

WILLIAMS: Oh yeah. There were plenty of people to go around. But it was funny, this thing about, "You go home, you see plenty of blacks; you go with us here." And if you went with a black they'd say, "You don't need to go with him, we're here." So you were kept pretty busy. One thing about-- At first I think I was acutely aware of, I guess-- They were so upset about the way blacks were treated in America that you felt they wanted to take your hand and take you everywhere so nothing would happen to

you. If you crossed the street or anything you did, there was this kind of protective thing, and with another layer, to make up for what was happening to you. It was beautiful, I guess, but I wasn't used to it, old independent me. "Don't, don't." You know, it's difficult to accept. But it went on as long as I was there.

MASON: So I guess all the black people in Moscow probably knew each other. Was there a place--?

WILLIAMS: Oh yes, you did. But you didn't necessarily-- That didn't mean that you just went with blacks; you went with everyone there.

SMITH: And you learned Russian fluently?

WILLIAMS: I had to, not-- As much as I could, and I did pretty well. I did so well that-- They have schools there, you know. If you go to school, or if you teach, you get a good salary. They had an executive school there where the executives of the big plants, like the factories and whatever you needed executives for in industry and so forth, attended to learn English. And they liked my English. They didn't like most English because it was-- They just didn't. So I did have an opportunity to teach everywhere I went, which helped. That's really how I made it in Europe, teaching English.

I should tell you about the first day I went to see this job. I don't know who recommended me or how I got

there, but I went out-- You've never seen tramways like they have in the Soviet Union. They start going down the hill and you run like hell to get on it, and you're then hanging outside somewhere. You don't want to step or something--

MASON: Sounds like the buses in London.

WILLIAMS: [You're] trying to hold on. But you're really exposed. This time I went out for this job, and the head or the chairman of the school came. He said, "I'm going your way, Miss Williams, and we can go together." And I thought, "That's fine." The trouble was that I had been in a queue to get a pair of boots, a pair of rubbers to go over my felt boots. And you waited and waited and waited for hours for these lines to get less and less so you could get them. Then when you finally got to what you wanted, it wasn't exactly what you wanted, but you took it because that's all that was available. So these rubbers were a little large for me. I'm telling you this to say that as we came home we got on the tramway or something, and someone stepped on the back of my rubber, and I was losing it. Well, I couldn't afford to lose it because it would mean waiting for a time when they'd have them again and then hoping I'd get them if they had them and going all through that. It was too much. This place was so crowded that I-- One was on but the other one was coming

off, so I kind of dragged one foot behind me, you know, going through the car. This principal or dean or chairman or whatever he was, was ahead of me trying to make way for me to get through this crowd. And we got to the back of the car. I didn't know what to do because there was just no space, except they made a little room like this to get off the car, down the step, and out. I didn't know what to do. I could not lose that rubber. I could not afford to. So the chairman got off and he stood at the steps waiting to help me off, and I took this foot and kicked over the heads of all these people and kicked this boot far enough out so I could retrieve it when I got off the car. [laughter] I was so embarrassed, but I had to save it. I don't know what he thought when this big rubber came sailing over his head, but I did get off, and I did get it. And I was happier about saving that than getting the job. [laughter]

At Verishka's house they had, I told you, the four corners, and I had a corner over here. Her oldest brother had a corner across from me, and there were two other people. Her brother was studying viola; he had an examination. He also was learning to work on a gyroplane. Do you know what a gyroplane is? Well, it was one of those planes where you go up with another plane and then it releases from one, and you have no motor, and you have

to guide it down. I remember one morning I rode in the fool thing. [laughter] One morning he got up-- He'd get up very early, four and five in the morning, because he had all these things to do. He got caught up in a tree and couldn't get down with his plane, and so he couldn't get back in time for school or what he had to go to. We didn't know about it until-- Well, you know, it's all complicated, but it was funny. He was a charming man too.

God, there are so many things. Here, you know, you felt you had to know all the right people, and you had to have money, and you had to have everything to get in. There you went to school, and you got a stipend, your health was taken care of, everything. It made such sense. I don't believe these people will ever give this up. You know, they may hastily make some decisions, but I don't think you can give up the ability to pay your rent out of a fraction of your money, like ten percent of it or less, so that your children can all be educated-- I don't believe you can give that up. I don't see how. I think if you do, you'd realize what a fool you were and try like hell to get it back. I really do. I haven't been convinced that this was not true. Oh well, it takes time, anyway. I wouldn't know--

One day I was walking down the street and there were about six or seven of us and I said, "Oh, Thanksgiving is

coming on." It was in November. And I said, "How I would like a good American dinner. Maybe roast chicken and sweet potatoes and cranberries and lemon meringue pie" or something, you know, that made you think of home. And suddenly I was walking alone. All of a sudden these people-- What the hell happened? I looked back, and they were all back there trying to pool the money they had together so I could have the kind of dinner I wanted to have. Isn't that wonderful? No one hoarded, because you didn't have to. No one hesitated to share anything. Isn't that beautiful living? It's beautiful. Oh, that was quite a dinner. We had a great, great time.

Let's see some of the other incidents-- I went over with-- Oh dear, what am I getting into? I went into Saint Petersburg with the head of Open Road that took the group across. I should tell you something about the boat. I went across the North Sea. I went on the Cunard Line, then I went across the North Sea on a little boat that went from side to side. You know, the waves were so big that it flipped the whole thing over to its left and then to its right. The pots on the stove would hop off and go sailing down the aisles or the walk areas. It was really a trip, but we had such a good time. All the men who worked on the ship were great people, they were all talented. We sang, we told stories, we ate all night,

champagned all night. I remember the girl said-- I didn't have any stockings on, and the girl said to one of the sailors, "Look, we'll bet you a quart of champagne if you can tell us whether or not she has stockings on."

[laughter] He looked and he looked and he said, "Yeah, She has," and I didn't. So we got more champagne. But these are the kinds of silly things that you did; it was fun.

Of course you heard about the wonderful subways there. They were so magnificent. Then we had-- I remember being on a bus one Sunday, and this woman came through and had one of those coats I told you the schoolteacher had when we did *Porgy*. [laughter] Anyway, this woman got on the bus, and as she went through the bus--of course it was crowded but not as crowded as the one I told you about previously--the fur came off this coat and got on everyone she passed. When she got to the end of the bus everyone was fussing and picking this stuff off their clothes, you know, they were so mad. One man said, "Why do you wear such a coat?" She said, "It's the only coat I have, and it's cold, and I have to wear it." The man said, "Well, if you have to wear it, turn it inside out, and wear the lining outside." [laughter]

One day, this chap, a black American-- I used to go over and fix dinner at intervals, and this time he fixed--

They had wonderful places you could go and pick out the fish you wanted and then cook it. Or if it was frozen, of course, that's different, and of course I would get a frozen one. So I get this frozen one to bake. I was going to stuff it and bake it. The damn thing never did thaw out. I baked it and baked it, wonderful stuffing and all the tomato sauce and trimmings. Ah, I'll never cook another frozen fish as long as I live. But those were kind of fun things that we did. Then, of course, the other time you studied like mad trying to-- And Sundays, almost every Sunday I went to another theater.

There was also a theater-- It wasn't a theater, it was a kind of-- What could you call it? It was a kind of studio theater where dancers and singers and actors would try out their wares. And then after it was over, the people who had assembled for it discussed it. And you could discuss until two and three and four o'clock in the morning, but it was just great, really. There was a man I had met in Cleveland, actually, named John Bovington. Did you ever hear of John Bovington? John Bovington was a very good dancer and probably the first man--he was white--I'd ever seen who shaved all of his hair off. But John was fun. He would come by your house and throw pebbles up at your window and say, "Get up, come on, let's go," that kind of crazy thing. He was in the Soviet

[Union] when I got there, and he did several dances at this studio place with discussion afterwards. It was at [the] Meyerhold [Theatre]. Shall I go there next?

SMITH: Yeah. How did you get involved with them? Well, through Vera, right?

WILLIAMS: Yeah. I don't think I ever saw Friedrich Wolf again. Did I tell you about A. Philip Randolph and the union and the workers where I built the club for the unemployed men?

SMITH: Yeah, the fathers club, right, yes.

WILLIAMS: Well, many of those men were cotton workers. Did I say this?

MASON: No.

SMITH: No, not that.

WILLIAMS: Well, they were, and in Georgia or Alabama, wherever they had their cotton, they pooled together, and these black men would buy a cotton gin and gin their own cotton. Then what happened is these KKK [Ku Klux Klan]ers would come and burn them out. Well, after they'd done that three times they couldn't get insured again, and that's when they started coming north, when they couldn't make a living in the South. After I built up this men's club-- I'd heard all these stories of their struggles and how they were mistreated and so forth. The very first Sunday that I was in the Soviet [Union] they were having a

party for the Stakhanovite who had picked the most cotton that year. Someone found out that I knew something about it, so they asked me to speak the very first Sunday I was there. And that was good that I was equipped with this kind of information and material because I could share it. From that time on I didn't have any trouble; I think that's how I really got through. That was a great, great, great time.

Then I met [a woman] who was head of one of the trade unions in industry, I don't know just which one. She was about six foot two, blond hair, beautiful, thick blond hair, a gorgeous woman, and she was the head of this union. She wanted to marry William Patterson. I don't know whether you know William Patterson.

SMITH: No.

WILLIAMS: William Patterson was the man who wrote a book called *We Charge Genocide [The Historic Petition to the United Nations for Relief from a Crime of the United States Government against the Negro People]*. And it was he who wrote the statement or whatever you call it to present to the United Nations on human rights.

SMITH: That was in the late 1940s, wasn't it?

WILLIAMS: Yeah. "What's a man?" He was a black man, you know, and married to Louise [Thompson] Patterson. I called him the fair-haired child of the Communist Party.

I thought he was just a spoiled brat, that's what I thought. But you might be interested-- I got sick in the Soviet Union. I had a fur on a suit coat. I was so cold I used to pin it with a safety pin or something, and it scratched my neck and caused an infection. I looked like I had two heads, and I couldn't get-- I had to get someone to recommend that I go to the hospital, and it ended up being this William Patterson. It was a beautiful experience. They came and got me, they took me to the hospital, and the hospital was like a little town. In every building was a special disease or illness. And when you arrived you went to a building and changed your clothes to your nightclothes. Then they put you on a sleigh drawn by horses, and you're lying on your back, and all I think of are these bells and these stars. Just the most beautiful ride, to be on your back riding on a sleigh through the night across these-- [It] seemed like miles to me.

MASON: Like going to heaven. [laughter]

WILLIAMS: Oh, you know about that, huh? [laughter]

MASON: No, it's just the way you describe it so vividly.

WILLIAMS: It was something that becomes part of you, it was so beautiful. You wanted it to become part of you. There, at that time, they still had lots of linen, I mean good cotton linens, so that anyone who came to visit you

had to go into a room or a building, they had to change their shoes or cover their shoes, and they had--I started to say a vestment--a garment that covered them completely and something on their head and something across their mouths. They used all this wonderful linen, made of flax. It was so beautiful. It was usually light blue, usually blue, I think. Hospital-- There was an actress in the bed across from me and she was a mess.

But they had in every building, whether it was a child's building or a theater or wherever you were-- There was always a "wallpaper," they called it, and on this "wallpaper"--on the bulletin board--were the things that either disturbed you or you wanted to offer praise for. And there-- The doctor that I had we liked very much. She was a charming, capable woman. She came in one morning in tears; I mean, her eyes were all red. We found out later that someone had criticized her in a letter. It was a woman who was-- She had a child and something happened, and they kept her in the hospital a day or two longer than they should have. They criticized this doctor for allowing this to happen. And this they wrote up on the wallpaper for everyone to see. It's cruel, but that's the way they did it. That's why she was crying so that day. I'm not sure she was removed.

I was in a kind of dormitory there but later I was

moved to a private room. I didn't like it half as much because I couldn't get any information or news, but they were good to me there, very good to me. But all this linen. The beds-- If you haven't been to Europe, especially, I would say, Denmark or the Soviet [Union] or-- Well, those two countries especially. They have sheets of this wonderful linen, and it's soft now, it isn't stiff. And it goes up, let's see, the height of your blanket and then folds back over about three-quarters of the length of the blanket back. Sometimes they were embroidered at that end or crocheted with deep crochet across the end. And sometimes they had buttons on the blankets so that these linen sheets could be buttoned onto the blankets. And if you had to go to the door, you picked up the whole thing and made it like a housecoat and go to the door. Isn't that lovely? I don't know, I think they're important to tell about. I just love the beds in Europe and I used to--

All those crazy things I liked almost as much as I did the theater. I remember when they ironed, they'd take a mouthful of water and spray the clothes as they ironed. [laughter] And they used to have these wonderful hardwood floors, and they'd have-- I guess they were bricks, but they would wrap their feet in the brick to polish the floor. You did it with your feet. These heavy bricks.

They were beautiful floors. I'm trying to think of some of the things like that that we did.

I was happy at Meyerhold. Everyplace like this-- For instance, Meyerhold had a summer home and a winter home that was their own home for their actors. In trade unions they had the same thing. In trade unions, for instance, you would have your cultural worker that would see that you had tickets for all the different plays and all the concerts.

TAPE NUMBER: III, SIDE TWO

APRIL 1, 1992

WILLIAMS: An actor always had an alternate so that your responsibility was to cover a certain period and then you were relieved by the alternate. Then both of you still had an understudy, you see. You had one understudy, as I remember it, and then the two alternate actors to take over. Usually when you were not acting you went to one of the clubs or homes that this group belonged to or owned or had assigned to them. And Vera was so funny. One time they were doing a play, and the man who was doing it that time, was acting, it was his turn to go away. His alternate didn't realize it, and so he didn't show up. So the understudy had to go on, and she said, "He was so frightened, Frances, he was so frightened, and he went on, and we thought, 'Will he make it, will he make it?' And he was working so hard and so frightened and suddenly," Vera said, "he let go." I thought, "Let go, yeah?" "His pants were full, but he then was good." [laughter] It was a wonderful thing, this planning of holidays and vacations as you worked. It was really wonderful. Natalie [Natalia] Satz had something very special that I liked at her theater [the Natalia Satz Children's Musical Theatre]. The hour or two before the play started they

had this huge lobby kind of area and there they would have music or they'd have something going on. The children would draw pictures and they'd have storytelling and all of these things for the children to keep them occupied before they went to see the play. Then at intermission they could come out and draw pictures about what they had seen in the play. I've done that-- Afterwards I tried that and it's fun.

SMITH: Did you take classes at the Meyerhold Theatre?

WILLIAMS: I worked mostly with Wayland.

SMITH: With Wayland, okay.

WILLIAMS: Because we both spoke English and he spoke this beautiful Russian.

SMITH: And he was-- His position-- He was an actor right?

WILLIAMS: He was an actor from New York and as I've said, a man with a beautiful voice, and very patient.

SMITH: Did you do any acting?

WILLIAMS: Some. We did scenes together and things like that that were fun, challenging. Then I would, I have seen-- Oh, [*The*] *Cherry Orchard*, what's the name of the man?

SMITH: Oh, Chekhov.

WILLIAMS: Chekhov, oh, no, no.

SMITH: *Cherry Orchard* is Chekhov.

WILLIAMS: No, no, I know, but I meant the theater.

SMITH: Oh, Stanislavsky.

WILLIAMS: Stanislavsky. I could go there [the Moscow Art Theatre] and see plays all the time. And this was an experience because what you found-- This man was such an artist that if anything moved, there was always a balancing, so that you were always in a picture that was perfect. And you felt like, "Oh, it's a prayer." It was just too lovely. Everything had been planned so well and worked on so well that it was great, great art. However, that was not my favorite theater.

SMITH: Which was your favorite theater?

WILLIAMS: There was a theater called Vakhtangov [Theatre]. Do you know that one?

SMITH: I know of it, yeah.

WILLIAMS: Man, you ain't lived till you've been there. The kind of things they did-- They worked without anything, no props, no anything. And they could come in and do a scene, they'd be sitting on chairs around a table, say, playing cards, and I swear you knew what the color of the card was and how many digits or clubs or hearts were on it when they played it, that's how accurate they were. They'd come in out of a snowstorm and talk together and then do something or eat together, you'd know exactly what they were eating. And there was nothing there but bodies. They could do anything. Just imagine

squatting down without a chair or a table. And everything had to be the same height, you see, or the table would disappear. So it had to be the same height in order to execute and hold that, you'd have to-- You'd see it. I've often wanted to do children's theater like that. But it would mean here I'd have to have [them] dancing, really dancing from the age of two or three for them to use their bodies well to do this. There are few adults I think that could do it.

SMITH: Your ideas about training actors and actresses, do you put a lot of emphasis or have you put a lot of emphasis on movement and bodily development?

WILLIAMS: Everything, everything. And I think the wonderful thing about being exposed to many different techniques, you can let them all serve you and serve the person with whom you're working. Some people respond with one technique and others with others, and you can combine them and do lots of things with them. I think too frequently you get a rigid way of doing it, and I don't approve of this, of course.

SMITH: How do you feel about the use of acrobatics in theater in, quote, unquote, "serious theater"?

WILLIAMS: I think they're acrobatics. [laughter]

SMITH: Yeah.

WILLIAMS: That isn't theater; that's just part of it.

You see, I've always wanted to do a whole school based on theater. I may have mentioned this. Did I? Because you have your mathematics, you have your languages, you have your history, you have everything you need to learn if you have a school of theater, the kind you should have. I like teaching, and I've fought it all my life. My mother wanted me to be a teacher; she thought I should be. I never wanted to, but I always drift to it. And then in later years, I think I'm a very good teacher.

SMITH: Did you know [Vsevolod] Meyerhold personally? Did you get to know him?

WILLIAMS: Yeah, yeah, but you know, he was always busy. I might tell you another thing about Meyerhold Theatre that was impressive too. It was one of the first theaters that didn't use a curtain in the front, and the proscenium open. And they would-- Again, all of the technicians dressed in light blue linen jumpsuits in 1934. Isn't that amazing? Now, you think they're just using jumpsuits. But these are linen jumpsuits. And you wanted to stay and see the technical side of what they were going to do as much as you wanted to see the acting.

SMITH: Did you know Zenaida Raikh?

WILLIAMS: Who?

SMITH: His wife, Zenaida?

WILLIAMS: No, I didn't know her well. He was more

involved in theater, and courageous. He had problems later.

SMITH: Yeah, and ended rather tragically.

WILLIAMS: Yes, yes, yes. But we had rich, full times, and he was patient, and he would give you time to talk through things. Usually I had to have an interpreter. But he was--

SMITH: Was he a Marxist, would you say?

WILLIAMS: I think so, I think so, but I think he worked hard at being a free thinker, you know. He wanted to pioneer. And he did. He did. He did beautiful theater. Yeah, I loved theater there, but the Vakhtangov, I'd go every time I had an opportunity.

SMITH: Did you know people who worked there?

WILLIAMS: I met some of the actors, some of them. Sometimes we'd eat together at home or at a restaurant or something. You get so busy, and then it's hard, it's so cold. Forty below in the winter, and the snow! The snow would pile up so all they did is do the sidewalk. And then the area from the street to the sidewalk is where they piled up the snow. You couldn't see across the street because the snow was piled so high, and all you'd do is see the sky. You had to look up.

SMITH: It gets pretty cold in Cleveland too. [laughter]

WILLIAMS: Oh no, but not like this, baby. [laughter]

SMITH: Natalie Satz, you studied with her as well?

WILLIAMS: Some, yes.

SMITH: What kind of person was she?

WILLIAMS: She was a businesswoman. And worked very hard at making it a very important theater, and it was. There are some young black Russians now there because of Lloyd Patterson and some of the others--[John Oliver] Golden and some of them--that I don't dare tell them what I thought of their father. [laughter] I just don't dare, for some of them are funny. Very funny. But to hear them talking now about him, they can't be talking about the same man I knew. And of course there I met-- Essie [Eslanda Goode] Robeson's brother was there, John Goode, and he was one of the dispatchers of the buses, transportation.

MASON: They were both there at one point.

WILLIAMS: No, I helped write letters to bring them over--

MASON: Oh.

WILLIAMS: --both Paul [Robeson] and Essie, but many other people did too. I can't take credit for having succeeded, but they did get there while I was there. Actually, things that happened there-- If I'm doing the wrong thing, stop me. But I remember I met-- What's the name of the wonderful writer that I love? Big mustache, thick hair--

SMITH: Maxim Gorky?

WILLIAMS: Gorky. Well, he was there when I was there.

And one day we were walking down the street and there were three little boys who came running and they pulled on his coat and said, "Mr. Gorky, Mr. Gorky." He said, "Yes." And this little boy said he had a theme he had to write for school, and he wondered if he'd help him with it. He said, "Well, I think there's something we can do about that." And he turned and there was this bench in the parkway, you know, where we were walking. We all sat down, and he talked with him about his whole composition. But it taught me that a great man always had time for children. You always must make time for people who need you. You may not have money, but give of yourself. And I've tried to do that ever since. He taught it to me, he really did. "Of course, let's see," I can see him now. "Let's sit here." [laughter]

SMITH: How did you get to meet him?

WILLIAMS: You see, when you do these-- Like I did that Sunday. You just meet people, and if you're different, too-- Being black helps sometimes, you see, because people wonder, "Who are you? What do you do?" Like in Finland they just go right up to you and look down your throat and say, "Vai niin."

MASON: What is that?

WILLIAMS: "Vai niin" is what they use. "Who, what, where did you come from? What are you?" Oh, that country is so

kind of naive, you know. It wasn't sophisticated like other countries might have been. I can tell you some grand stories there too. There's so much I can't remember.

SMITH: You mention in one of your bio[graphical] statements that you knew Eisenstein as well.

WILLIAMS: Yes, actually Vera's son was the boy that played in *The Circus*.

SMITH: Oh.

WILLIAMS: You know, the famous *The Circus*, the picture?

SMITH: Yeah.

WILLIAMS: And I used to go out with him on sets and then we became well acquainted and he wanted-- I taught his wife English. And then later, he was going to do *Huckleberry Finn* and change the uncle to an aunt so I could do the aunt.

MASON: I understand he also wanted to do-- He talked to Paul Robeson about doing something on *Stevedore*. Do you know anything about that? He wanted to do a film based on that?

WILLIAMS: He should have, he should have. No, I didn't, but he should have. It would have been great. I loved *Stevedore*.

SMITH: Were you taking political classes at the time?

WILLIAMS: Where? In the Soviet Union?

SMITH: Yeah, in the Soviet Union.

WILLIAMS: No, no. I told you that I went to the head of the Open Road, and he had lived in Russia all of his life. He went to school there. He had a friend who was a captain in the army, and the first night I was there we had this beautiful suite of rooms in this gorgeous hotel, all gold and red velvet and all the trimmings. He ordered dinner, from caviar to you name it, and all the champagne and liquor, and I was thinking, "This is great." And this captain came with his wife, and this other man and I were together, and it was a great night, it was quite a night. I had been superintendent or head of the Sunday school at my church before I left. And I thought I was pretty honest. I worked at it. But this night we would eat, and every once in a while this man would get up and start walking all over the apartment, and I thought, "That's a funny kind of custom." So then we'd go on, we'd eat or sing or talk or whatever was happening, and then this man would get up and start walking again. Well, this went on and on and finally I said, "Oh, look, what's this? I can't understand this, my friend." And he said, "You don't know about men and women." I said, "Yeah." "Well, he wants very much to be with you." And I said, "Oh." "And his wife wants you to come back home with them so he can be with you." And I, the Sunday school teacher, said,

"Oh, oh no, I'd never do anything like that." Do you know that man followed me all over the Soviet Union for two years? I would be eating at the Savoy Hotel on the roof or, you know, anything, and the waiter would come over and say, "You're wanted on the phone." [laughter] For two years he did this. One time I met his son with his wife, and she said, "We will always have a room for you." But I couldn't be honest. He was gorgeous, big dark curls and deep dimples and sparkling eyes. He was beautiful. And if I'd been honest I would have said, "Yes." [laughter] This man that I was asking about then, Louie-- I can't think of his last name, he was Hungarian. And in Europe one time his youngest daughter got married, and Paul Robeson was in Europe, and he had Paul come to Hungary to be at the wedding and sing. I met last year this daughter and her husband. Oh, such beautiful people. Whew!

SMITH: Did you see much non-Russian theater from the Turkish peoples or--?

WILLIAMS: Some. I saw quite a number of theaters. Almost every week I went to at least one.

SMITH: Yeah.

WILLIAMS: At least one, and repeated, of course, on many of them. I saw some excellent theater.

SMITH: Did you meet [Nikolai] Okhlopkov?

WILLIAMS: Who?

SMITH: Okhlopkov, from the Mayakovsky Theatre?

WILLIAMS: I may have. It sounds familiar but I don't--

SMITH: What about Michael Chekhov?

WILLIAMS: Yeah, I met him. Yeah. I studied with him here.

SMITH: Yeah, he came here--

WILLIAMS: I studied with him here at the Actors Lab. I was on the board there.

SMITH: At least in the history books, they write about a big competition between Meyerhold and Stanislavsky and that their methods were completely the opposite of each other.

WILLIAMS: Exactly the opposite. Exactly.

SMITH: So how do you feel--? How do you--?

WILLIAMS: There's room for both of them.

SMITH: Uh-huh.

WILLIAMS: Definitely. I think what Stanislavsky did was gorgeous and beautiful, but there's still a lot more to be said.

SMITH: But I'm talking in terms of acting method. You know, Stanislavsky starting from this core experience and building your part around it, whereas Meyerhold seems to be, "Get the biomechanics right and the emotions will follow."

WILLIAMS: He was more than that.

SMITH: Oh, okay.

WILLIAMS: More than that. No, no, you knew what you were doing and who you were and why and how you related to everyone. Oh, yes, he was a good teacher.

SMITH: And he was very much concerned with the physical impression that you projected.

WILLIAMS: Well, he was fighting to be a pioneer in a place where, I think, habit and custom you held on to a long time, and that's not easy to do in that setting.

SMITH: But when you approach a role, and it probably varies from play to play and program to program, but do you follow a method, do you follow kind of the method acting of finding a core and building around it? Or do you get a physical image in your mind?

WILLIAMS: Oh, no, no, I start from inside out. I'm sure. I like to see the whole, for instance, like Signe Hasso. She will have an artist sketch the person she's supposed to be and try to fill it in as a person, as an actress. I think this helps.

SMITH: It helps.

WILLIAMS: But it's part of it.

SMITH: To get a sense-- This exterior--

WILLIAMS: To know where you're going. And yet it could be limiting, you see, because the minute you build walls, you're closing in.

SMITH: Yeah.

WILLIAMS: And I don't ever want to do that. I like to keep reaching, breaking out of the mold as much as possible.

SMITH: Was this the first time you would say you were exposed to theater theory?

WILLIAMS: Theater theory?

SMITH: Yeah.

WILLIAMS: Oh yes, but did I get dosages. [laughter] I really did. It was great.

Did I tell you when I went over on that boat to the Soviet Union, Anna Louise Strong--?

SMITH: You mentioned it, but you didn't go into any detail.

WILLIAMS: She was on the boat, and so was Wilhelmina Burroughs.

MASON: Oh, Margaret Burroughs.

WILLIAMS: Margaret Burroughs's mother.

MASON: Oh.

WILLIAMS: No, not her mother. Her husband's mother. She wanted me to be sure when I came back to keep an eye on the children. We're all about the same group, age. And I did at one time. She had three children, Wilhelmina Burroughs did. And she remained in the Soviet [Union] for quite a long time and was put in charge of television, the

English department of television. I remember White--
What's the name of this man and his wife, Bourke-White?

MASON: The photographer?

SMITH: Margaret Bourke-White.

WILLIAMS: Margaret Bourke-White and her husband [Erksine Caldwell] came over and later wrote a book, and they said "Some mammy--" I don't know whether they said, "Some mammy with kinky hair" had to okay their script before they could do it on television there. They were talking about Wilhelmina Burroughs. Wilhelmina Burroughs, let me tell you, organized the teachers union in New York City and they fired her. She'd been in the Soviet Union ten years and got retroactive pay. Isn't that wonderful? She was a great woman. She was the first black woman that I ever saw with a natural: she wore her hair like a little boy's. She was a beautiful woman. She was dark brown, with rosy cheeks and deep dimples. She was really lovely. Her husband worked in the post office, and remember *The Sixty-Four Thousand Dollar Question*. He won *The Sixty-Four Thousand Dollar Question* on Shakespeare. The subject was Shakespeare. They were all bright. None of the children have come up to the parents, none of them. The daughter taught [Émile Jaques-Dalcroze's] eurythmics. She studied in, not Germany, Switzerland I think. The oldest son studied with Max Reinhardt in Germany.

SMITH: Yeah, I think you mentioned that before.

WILLIAMS: And the youngest one married Margaret [Taylor Burroughs] when he came back. He was fluent in the Russian language and he took, I think, electrical engineering.

SMITH: What was your perception and your response to the kind of growing political problems that were developing in the mid-thirties?

WILLIAMS: In this country?

SMITH: Well, no, actually in the Soviet Union, after the murder of [Sergei Mironovich] Kirov and the anti-Trotsky campaign became more serious.

WILLIAMS: I didn't get into that. I would get into things like the Scottsboro boys and what happened to them there. For instance, Lloyd Patterson would go on speaking trips to different areas of the Soviet Union talking about the Scottsboro boys. I remember he came home one night very late and he had his coat on. It wasn't cold, but he had a long coat on. And we said, "Why don't you take off the coat?" He said, "After a while." He said that he had had an interpreter who said-- He had gone through this big speech about the nine Scottsboro boys and when he finished the translator was in tears. She said, "That poor little nine-year-old Scottsboro boy," [laughter] instead of nine boys. And he said they were so happy at his speech that

they threw him up in the air and caught him, and threw him up in the air and caught him, and he split his pants.

[laughter] That's why he had the coat on.

SMITH: Oh.

WILLIAMS: You might like to know this. One time there was no one home except Frances--me. And the social worker from the trade union that Lloyd was attached to came to find out if that apartment could have a piano and what kind of piano, because they discovered that Lloyd knew how to play piano and sing. And here they were looking over the apartment to see what would fit in there that he could use. While they were doing that I said, "Well, you haven't seen any of Vera's things." Vera would paint on anything, slabs of orange crates-- She broke up everything and painted on it. She just painted, she never could stop. So I went back and got all these things out, and the social worker was so impressed because she was good. I have some of her things here. The social worker was so impressed with the work she did, they ended up getting a housekeeper so that they wouldn't have to devote so much of their time to chores in the home, and then they got a piano for Lloyd. Now, that I call planned living.

SMITH: Well, you know, the reason I ask the question is because the Meyerhold Theatre was shut down in '37.

WILLIAMS: Yeah.

SMITH: I mean, Meyerhold was killed, and--

WILLIAMS: Yeah, but when you're in there studying languages, trying to live, you don't really--

SMITH: So you didn't--

WILLIAMS: And not only that, I didn't know the language well enough to keep informed about--

SMITH: Well, were there--? Was Vera worried about--?

WILLIAMS: Who?

SMITH: Your friend, Vera, was she worried about what might be happening?

WILLIAMS: I didn't get any idea about it. I didn't really.

SMITH: Because as you said--

WILLIAMS: Maybe once in a while something would come up but it--

SMITH: --he was already being criticized--

WILLIAMS: I know, I know.

SMITH: --in the press.

WILLIAMS: Oh yes, that's why I told you.

SMITH: Yeah.

WILLIAMS: I know. But I still am glad I went there.

SMITH: Why did you--?

WILLIAMS: I think Wayland had a lot to do with my going there.

SMITH: Did you know him before you went there?

WILLIAMS: No.

SMITH: But a lot of American blacks decided to stay in the Soviet Union because life was so much better for them. What led you to decide to come back home?

WILLIAMS: By that time the homestead was in Oberlin [Ohio], and in Oberlin on Sunday afternoons they usually talked about things around the world. They had a four o'clock forum or something. And I had not written home for six weeks or more. Mother hadn't heard from me. She didn't know where the hell her daughter was. So this Sunday someone reported that there was a Frances Williams in the Soviet [Union] who'd just had an operation, and my mother fainted. [laughter] So I had to write home. The embassy said you must write. So I did. It was difficult to take time out to write when everything-- The money was changing, the government was changing, everything was changing every minute. You know, there was just no time to lolladol. Who in the hell's going to write a letter with all these things? Overnight you might miss something. And they were happening fast, that I was aware of.

SMITH: Yeah.

WILLIAMS: I can't tell you now all the things, but I know every day I didn't want to miss anything.

One thing they did, everywhere you went you had to

take off your rubbers or your shoes or your coats, if you went to a hotel for dinner or anything. And I remember the first time I went to the Savoy Hotel for dinner, I went upstairs and I had to take my rubbers off. I hate to say it, I should call it something else. Anyway, when I came down, they handed me these things, and I said, "I'm sorry, those are not mine. Mine were filthy." These things were polished and shined and they looked like new. Mine had not looked like that, so I just knew they were not mine. There was something-- What they had was so precious. You couldn't go to a bookshop without taking off your rubbers. You took off your galoshes or whatever you had on your feet. And if you started in you'd see someone outside going, "Oh, no, no, no, no." You'd go to have your boots shined, and if you had a spot, a grease spot, or anything on them, you were in for a lecture. And you were so cautious of taking care of them afterwards. Every week or so when I'd go for a shine like that, they'd really inspect them to see how you'd taken care of them.

SMITH: So when you came back home, did you plan, did you say to yourself, now I'm going to be a professional actress, I'm going to go--?

WILLIAMS: Oh, continue? I was only home two weeks when I had *You Can't Take It with You*.

SMITH: You got cast in that, yeah.

WILLIAMS: I had already decided to invest in a barbecue place with a theater in the Soviet Union. There was Aunt Dinah's Kitchen, and we had a little theater there too.

SMITH: Oh, okay. In the United States, back here--

WILLIAMS: Uh-huh, in New York.

SMITH: In New York you had a theater waiting for you.

WILLIAMS: No, but I found out about it when I got there.

SMITH: Now tell us about Finland. You stayed there about six months. What made you decide to spend six months?

WILLIAMS: I had to get my visa renewed.

SMITH: Oh, to come back into Russia, into the Soviet Union?

WILLIAMS: Uh-huh. But my money was awfully short by that time. They had a custom in Finland: when you sat down to dinner, you always opened the window and put food out for the birds before you ate. And I got so broke and so hungry that I went to the bakery where they also sold milk, got sour milk clabber, a quart of it for three cents, and came home and opened the window and took back the bread I had given to the birds. [laughter] Finland was quite a country.

SMITH: Who did you study with there? Did you work at a particular theater?

WILLIAMS: In Finland?

SMITH: Yeah, in Finland.

WILLIAMS: I taught English mostly.

SMITH: You taught English, yes.

WILLIAMS: I did go to school, though; I did study cooperatives there.

SMITH: Oh. The place to do it, I guess.

WILLIAMS: Yes, they were the first ones. So I did study there. Oh, many things I could tell you about it; it's probably getting-- For instance, I lived in one of the co-op houses. I had an apartment with a Finnish nurse, and they had several floors below that were all bedrooms, one room. And the Germans-- Whole ships would come over and they'd house them there, I found out. One day I called. I wanted something from [Baron Carl Gustaf Emil von] Mannerheim. He was the head of the army in Finland. And I guess I called on Monday and the housekeeper said, "Well, you know better than to call on Monday if you want to get General"--or whatever his name was--"Mannerheim. He's always in Nuremberg on Monday morning. You know that." So I ended up having two--what do you call the men?--follow me all over the place. I had coverage.

I met Ingmar Bergman there. That's a long story. If you want to hear it I can tell it.

SMITH: Maybe we should do that next time.

WILLIAMS: Uh-huh, I think so.

MASON: Yeah.

SMITH: We're kind of pressed for time.

MASON: I have a class.

WILLIAMS: All right, we can go into Finland the next time.

SMITH: Okay.

TAPE NUMBER: IV, SIDE ONE

APRIL 29, 1992

SMITH: I had a couple of follow-up questions on Karamu Theatre. One is, looking at the settlement houses, I was actually surprised to see that most of them all across the country had theater groups, and arts was a big part of the settlement house--

WILLIAMS: Program.

SMITH: --program, but the principle was not art so much as group process and using what we would call art therapy nowadays. I was wondering about the degree to which your conflicts, your disagreements with the Jelliffes [Rowena and Russell W.] had to do with your wanting to view the theater as a professional company and their viewing the theater in this kind of group process of working out collective problems through art kind of approach. Was that a factor, do you think?

WILLIAMS: I think not. I hadn't thought it through, but the reason I say that from the top of my head is that we were so supportive of the professional groups that came, you see. Especially the black groups.

SMITH: Yeah.

WILLIAMS: I don't know where the degree of questioning or of inclusion-- Why it was necessary, whether it came from

the group or whether it came from the Jelliffes or whether it came from both. I know it came from both because you had publications, the [Cleveland] *Plain Dealer* for instance, that said who was coming to town. And we were a theater group, so we'd be interested, and I'm certain the other people would be even more interested than I because they'd know more, and I was younger. I doubt whether that was true.

SMITH: But your idea was to develop Karamu House into a fully professional, financially self-supporting theater.

WILLIAMS: Oh, yes. But I did want the people trained who were there.

SMITH: Yeah.

WILLIAMS: And this didn't happen.

MASON: This may be a little off the track, but I asked you before about this controversy between Langston Hughes and Zora Neale Hurston. And you mentioned that the problem over the play "Mule Bone: [A Comedy of Negro Life]" was that basically Zora Neale Hurston had taken the writings of Langston Hughes and put her name on it. But I was reading a book the other day that sort of made me start to think about, well, why is that? Why would somebody as talented as Zora Neale Hurston try to appropriate the work of Langston Hughes? Was it just an artistic sort of ego conflict? Since you knew both of

them I thought you might have some insight.

WILLIAMS: No, I have a feeling that this happened in a situation where she wanted a scholarship or a grant and had to have suddenly a great deal of work or something to show to do it. And she just used it. She appropriated it and used it. I think that's what it really was.

MASON: But he never talked to you about that specific incident?

WILLIAMS: He's the one who told me about it. He laughed, he said, "Can you imagine, Frank, what she did? I picked up the book, and it was mine from cover to cover. But it had her name on the cover." [laughter] I really do think it was the kind of thing that Zora would do if someone suddenly said, "Look, I can get you \$500 if you can show me this kind and this much material." And she said, "I can do it." [laughter]

MASON: So her friendship with Langston Hughes--

WILLIAMS: But she didn't think about that. She thought about getting that money she needed, I think. It didn't seem dishonest to her. They'd worked together a lot, and I think she would have said, "Take mine and do this with it if this will help you." I think it was that kind of thing that we don't think-- We're so busy thinking in a different point of view now, I think. No, I think it was-- Personally this is the way I feel about it. But I

remember when Langston told me we just howled.

MASON: But that was the end of their friendship, though.

WILLIAMS: Well, I think you'd get a little more cautious, wouldn't you? [laughter] I don't think it was the end of their friendship. Like Langston one time wanted to take a group to Europe. He wanted to take and be in charge of it. I said, "Langston, what the hell are you doing that for? You can't even fight verbally," you know. And he said, "Frank, I could come back and write them a letter." So I mean, this is his personality, you can see, in contrast.

SMITH: So he kind of withdrew from confrontation?

WILLIAMS: Yeah, he came from a different place, you see. Zora was on the nose and Langston was not. I mean, he'd feel it, but he wouldn't articulate it the same way. People are people; they're each different. But I think it's very difficult for us to judge when you're not in the space in which they were. And I think that it would be very difficult for a person writing a book about it to deal with it properly. In other words, I'm saying don't believe all you read. [laughter]

MASON: Well, the way it's presented it's just such a mystery. They were such good friends and she did this thing inexplicably and that was kind of the end of their friendship. They were both talented--

WILLIAMS: But I'm sure she just took it because she needed it and saw nothing wrong with it. I'm sure, from her point of view. And maybe she did, but she said she was going to do it anyway because that's Zora, you know.

MASON: Should we talk about Mexico next because that might tie in with Langston Hughes?

SMITH: Sure, okay.

MASON: You mentioned going to Mexico at sixteen. Did that have something to do with Langston Hughes?

WILLIAMS: At sixteen?

MASON: Yeah. Well, when did you go to Mexico?

WILLIAMS: Not at sixteen.

MASON: Oh.

WILLIAMS: No, I went in '34.

MASON: Uh-huh.

SMITH: After you came back from the Soviet Union?

WILLIAMS: Before I went.

SMITH: Oh, before you went, okay.

WILLIAMS: Before I went. Early in the year of '34 I'm sure.

SMITH: So you were nineteen then?

WILLIAMS: I was? [laughter] Okay, yeah, I wasn't sixteen. Oh, I know what you're referring to. You're referring to the first time I left home, and I went East. I was sixteen, I think. And I went back to East Orange

for the first time, and I sent telegrams back to everyone saying, "I'm on my way" or "Good-bye" or "I'll see Grandpa in the morning" or something like this. That's when the sixteen came in, I think.

MASON: What were your reasons for going to Mexico?

WILLIAMS: I wanted to go. Just wanted to go.

MASON: You didn't know anyone down there?

WILLIAMS: No.

MASON: What were you going to look for? The art or what?

WILLIAMS: I don't know. I didn't know what there was to look for. I just wanted to go. I just had the traveling bug, and I had a friend who worked in the library [Rotha Calhoun], and she wanted to go too. We were not good friends, but we knew each other all through school. We used to play hooky together and go to the library and read all the books we could find. I mean that kind of friendship, you know. We kind of talked about it, and she said she'd like to go to Mexico. I said, "Oh, that's exciting," and I was just terminating a relationship with my first husband [George Ferguson] at that time. So we tried to see if we could get enough money together to do it. And we did. Rotha didn't have as much as I had, which was only a few hundred dollars more. But it meant that I could leave her in Monterrey. I left her at Monterrey and went on to Mexico City alone.

SMITH: Did you go to the theater in Mexico City?

WILLIAMS: Only the-- Let me see, theaters, theaters, theaters. No, I think it was mostly crafts. At that time I think I was more interested in what they made with their hands and the old serapes and the pottery and leather. They did a lot with leather. I was very interested in crafts at that time, I think. I loved it. It was a wonderful trip.

Did I say how I got to go? Nothing? Well, when my first husband left I had purchased a dark red Ford sedan, and I didn't know how to drive the thing. And my oldest brother, who was a numbers king--he was at least trying hard to be at that time--didn't have a car, or something went wrong with his car. And when he heard that I had this one and I couldn't drive it, he said, "Well, let me have it, I could use it." So I let him take it, but he never brought it back. And when Rotha and I got ready to go to Mexico, I said, "Look, I must have it," because it was our means of transportation to Mexico. He didn't bring it. So one very rainy night, I knew where he had to go or pass a corner, and I went there with a man who could drive it and just put him in a hotel and took the car back home, had it gone over, and went to Mexico.

The thing that was crazy in learning how to drive-- My first husband, Ferguson, had taught me on a parking

lot, and all he taught me was to back up, you know. So I could do most of my driving in reverse rather than going forward, so I didn't feel too secure. But the night that Rotha and I started out, she said, "Kid, you take the wheel?" And I said, "All right." And it was light-- [It was] evening, you know. I drove all the way to Saint Louis, Missouri, and when I looked over, Rotha was asleep all the time. I said, "Darling, how could you sleep when I haven't had one good driving lesson?" And she said, "Well, if we're going to go, you're going to have to drive. And I put my life in your hands because I know how much you think of your own." [laughter]

So we got to Saint Louis and lots of the-- You see, in '33 and '34 women didn't do anything alone. You hardly went to the grocery alone. And to have two young women going out of the state, you see, and to another country was just unheard of. So when we got to Saint Louis many of our friends, old Ann Arbor guys who used to come over to the house and many of our friends who then were just beginning to practice in their professions, tried to dissuade us from going. When they found they couldn't, they said, "Well, let us take the car and put it in a garage, and have them go over it so that at least we'll feel you had that part taken care of, and just be careful."

It happened that just outside and up into, oh, the Ozark Mountains, they'd just had a lynching. And when we got to the Ozark Mountains center the car started banging and making dreadful noises, and we didn't know what was the matter. They had forgotten to oil the crankcase, and it just went out. So in the mountains, we passed this mechanic shop that took care of cars and had a sign saying that they were open twenty-four hours a day. "That's fine. We'll put the car in there and let him fix it, and we'll see if we can get a place to sleep and eat. Then we'll get up in the morning early and go on our way."

Did I tell you about the colonel and all that? None of this, huh? Well, if you wanted a stereotype of an old white colonel, we found it right there. He was very impressed seeing us, and he said, "Oh yes, yes, yes, yes. Anything I can do for you, I'll do it." And I said, "Well, right now we're looking for a good place to eat." And he said, "Oh, we have a fine restaurant down the street, fine restaurant down the street, and you just tell them I sent you down there." I went down to the restaurant and they had pork chops and potatoes and greens, or something, and salad. And just as I started out the door, the woman said, "And when you come back, dear, please come in the back door. We have a kitchen table that we scrub every day, and you can eat there." I

said, "Thank you very much." So I went back, and by that time Rotha-- I told her to stay with the garage man, you see. When I came back, oh, it was like a holiday, there were so many people around Rotha. I kind of winked at her because I wanted to get her attention to tell her what had happened. And she said something about food. "Oh, don't bother about food," I said. "We have enough left over. Let's just find someplace to sleep." And the colonel said, "Oh, there must be a place. I think I can get you a place." I said, "Never mind, darling. We aren't thinking alike." I said, "That restaurant couldn't serve us, so I doubt if you could find us a place to sleep." We didn't have sleeping bags then; we had tarpaulins. Did you ever hear of tarpaulins? [We had] tarpaulins and blankets, but at least tarpaulins were waterproof, so you could put them on the ground and then get in them with your blankets, which is what we planned to do. So I told him, no, we wouldn't bother about the hotel, we would just use our tarpaulins and the things and sleep out of doors somewhere. And he said, "Oh well, if that's what you want to do, I have a house down the street, and you can sleep in my backyard." We went down the road, and there was this iron fence around this little white house with pillars. Can you imagine up in the Ozark Mountains? It was a replica of all the things that you thought of the

southern colonel and how they lived, all these things. Here was this little white house with, I can see it now, I think six pillars across the front of it, and the whole thing [had] much acreage fenced with this iron fencing. So we started in and he closed the gate behind us. "Now," he said, "nothing will bother you here. You just tell them that you're my guest and you can sleep here in my backyard. There are rattlesnakes, but I understand they don't bother colored people." So we started around and we said, "Well, here we come, rattlesnakes." And we put our tarpaulins down and made our beds up.

Rotha's mother hadn't wanted her to go because she didn't have an evening gown. I thought, "What in the world do you need an evening gown to go to Mexico for?" But her mother couldn't understand how anyone could go out of the country and not have an evening gown. We finally convinced her that we were going to do it anyway. So we got there-- Oh wait, have you ever seen old sandwiches? You know how the bread curls up on the end and the jelly goes bad? Well, we ate those things with water and rancid coffee and said, "Well, this is it, let's go to sleep." So she rolled up in her bed, and I rolled up in mine and my tarpaulin and went to sleep, and about three o'clock in the morning it started raining. And I got so tickled, I said, "Hey, Rotha. Hey, Rotha. Wake up, girl, and put on

that evening gown." [laughter] And so we were there for a while and we finally got the idea that since the garage was open twenty-four hours we would just go back there and get our things back in the car and leave as early as we could. So we gathered up everything and went back to the garage. We got to the garage, we looked through the windows--the garage was locked--and our car was up on whatever you put cars up on, and we couldn't reach anyone. But there was an old milk car in the parking lot of the garage, and I said, "Well, let's get in this milk car until they open the garage." We got in it to continue our sleep, and I guess we slept until about five o'clock or so. The milkman came, and the garage man came, and the garage man said that we were missing something that they couldn't replace locally and that we had to go back to Saint Louis to get it or send back for it. So we asked the milkman if he would bring it back when he came at four o'clock that afternoon. He said that he would, so we gave him money and he did. That was his truck.

Then, you see, we were stuck in the center where there had been a lynching. We were in the Ozark Mountains, you see. And there was a big kind of funny brick factory. We had moved out of the yard of the colonel's, and we were just kind of in the back of where railroad tracks had been. This garage-- I'll never

forget, we made coffee, and you looked up, and all these people were looking out of the windows of this factory as if a circus was going on below or something, I don't know what. But anyway, we said "Hi" and went on. Rotha went uptown. She went out and got groceries and things so that we could cook out of doors. Then we played cards. We were so comfortable and so relaxed that the people couldn't quite understand what was happening. They ended up bringing their babies out for us to see and their puppies and pictures of their family and offered us things like apples or fruit or something like that. They were really very nice and hospitable.

Then, let's see, we stayed-- Well, this is what we did that day. In the afternoon the colonel came by in his car and said he wanted us to see the countryside and he was going to take us for a ride. He put us-- He was the money giver or maker in the town. He was the big money man. So they really respected him, and that he would take time with us, I think, made us more prestigious or something. Anyway, we got in the car and he drove us all around the countryside. It was really beautiful country. And then he stopped at a kind of bar, and I'll never-- You know those huge goblets? Huge, they must hold a quart of beer. He went in and brought us each back one of these goblets of beer. And he went back in, I guess, with his

friends. But we didn't care: we had some good cold beer, we were riding all around the country. He came out to see if we wanted refills, and we decided we didn't.

By that time, most of the day had passed, and we asked him to take us back to the garage, and he did. We got there, and something happened-- Rotha stayed outside, and you can imagine how I looked at that time. My hair was a mess, and I was a mess, and we hadn't had a bath, and, you know, you just felt kind of disheveled or I don't know what. Just a mess. So I went in there to check some things and put things in the back trunk of the car and so on, and the garage man said, "Pardon me. Tell me, lady, what are you?" And I said, "What am I?" He said, "Yeah, what are you?" I didn't know what he meant, and I said, "Well, I don't know what you call them here, but where I come from they call us colored people." He said, "Really?" I said, "Yeah." And he said, "I ain't never seen none like you." To this day I don't know what he meant. I have no idea what he meant. But anyway, he was very kind and did a good job on the car. The milkman came and brought the part, and we got together and we left the Ozarks and started out again towards Mexico.

We went on. Everyplace that we went, we were trying to get-- You didn't need a visa, but you needed permission to go into Mexico. I think they gave you a slip. And

there was no place with an ambassador or an office for tourists that would give us anything. They were either closed when we got there, they weren't going to open until next week, or some kind of crazy thing. We got all the way to San Antonio, and we said, "That's good because this is a big city and we'll get what we want." I went into this damned office of the tourists set up for Mexico and asked for a permit to go into Mexico. Do you know what she said to me? "Honey, we don't service you here." I said, "Beg your pardon?" "Honey, we don't service your kind of people here." So I thought, "Oh God, here we go again." I said, "Damn it, get me all the maps for this area that you have, and let me look at them, will you?" And she said, "Oh, all right." I smoked Camels then--one, two packs a day--and I took out this cigarette and started smoking it, and I guess I looked like a permanent fixture to be dealt with. So I got the maps and worked out our trip all the way through into Mexico. This was the last stop we could get to before the border. I can't think of another big stop.

But we were so disappointed and it was getting very near-- I think the next day or that day was my birthday, and I wanted to be in Mexico on my birthday, that was it. Someone had given us the name of a rather wealthy black man in San Antonio. His name, I think, was Ballinger. He

lived in the most magnificent home. It was a whole city block with a six- or seven-foot big block brick fence all around it. Oh, it was very impressive for us. So we rang the bell and told him who we were and who had sent us. They asked us to come in and that they would provide for us. They were shocked that two young women were loose running around the countryside. But we had a wonderful meal there. We asked them if we could sleep in their yard because it was all fenced in and it was all grass. It was beautiful. And they said, "Sleep in the yard? Why, of course not. A person could throw a bomb over the wall." [laughter] Years later-- He was a big numbers man, and that's how he made his money there. We didn't know any of this, you know. So we decided we wanted to see the city and all, and I wanted-- You remember jodhpurs? They were a trouser that women--

SMITH: Oh, yeah.

WILLIAMS: With a big round-- Do you remember? And a narrow leg? Do you remember that? I could draw a picture of it. Well, that's what I wore then, and I guess I liked shocking people because women didn't wear anything but skirts, you know, but I wore jodhpurs. And in San Antonio they had the best tailors for the army. So I decided that I'd go to one of these tailors and get me some fine tailored jodhpurs. I went in and ordered a half a dozen

white linen jodhpurs, and they said they'd have them for me at four o'clock that day. This was early in the morning. Then we said we'd go out and buy some steaks and go out in the park and cook them, you know, barbecue them, and make this my birthday party. We got out in the park, and we were cooking these steaks, and the policemen came up and said, "Where y'all from?" And we told him. "Well, I thought you weren't from around here, because your folks don't come in this park." I said, "They don't?" He said, "But I'll tell you what I'll do. I'll just let you finish your steaks and eat 'em, and then will you leave?" That was my birthday in San Antonio. That's what we did. And we went back to the Ballingers' for, I guess, overnight and then left early the next morning for Mexico.

We got to the border, and they had a meeting room, I guess, for all the governing people in that area. And they decided that we had to be interviewed there. There was great retaliation in Mexico about the way Mexicans were treated in the United States. They had to figure out how they could retaliate. They didn't believe, you see, that any black person coming from the United States at that time could be anything other than a servant. So I went in first to be interviewed. When I got through trying to explain that I was a social worker and I was not a servant, they didn't believe me. They couldn't even

comprehend it. And they said that I'd have to leave a deposit of \$200 at the border. Well, God, if I leave \$200 and Rotha leaves \$200, there will be no reason to go to Mexico. So I came out of the room and Rotha was coming toward me and I said, "Girl, you're ofay, ofay, ofay, sir. Girl, and your mother before you was a ofay." I just went on and on like this, and she caught what I was trying to do. Do you? You don't either? "Ofay" was what we called white people, so when I told her she was white, she knew she had to be white. Well, Rotha looked like an Italian. You couldn't tell what she was. So when she went in, she just was Italian. She was ofay. [laughter] You look so bewildered.

MASON: No, it's just hard to imagine, you know, living in that time and making these types of transitions.

WILLIAMS: Oh, really? Well, I lived there. And Rotha got out without having to put a deposit down, so it meant the only deposit was my \$200 because she caught the ofay thing.

We got in our car, and we kept on going into the country. We got into the country-- Where did we come in at? We were on the east coast of Mexico. Yeah, because we came in San Antonio through Texas and down to Monterrey. Well, we ended up in Monterrey. We were so hot, we were so dirty, we were so tired and hungry. I'd

never been more hungry than I was at that time. We had had nothing. Well, [we had] those steaks of course, but, you know, you're looking forward to good food or something. Anyway, we said we'd go to a little hotel and get dressed and washed and all. We had brought our sheets and things with us and while Rotha was taking a bath, I was doing the beds. And when I turned these beds back, honey, you never saw so many bedbugs in your life. They were just thick. It was awful. We were both menstruating, so you can imagine how miserable we were. We were miserable. And we had to-- We didn't want our own clothes to get contaminated with these bedbugs. So we shook the bugs out, we went and put the bags outside the windows or doors or something, in the out-of-doors, and we got back in our clothes and started out.

By this time it's seven o'clock and we haven't had a good sleep and had gone through all this business at the border. We're in Monterrey, and as you walk, you're looking in windows. You know how store windows and the door is here, you know what I mean? There is a window case on this side? And we're looking in these, and every time we'd look in we'd see this man looking in with us, his reflection, you know, like a mirror. Everywhere we went he was behind us, and we didn't know what to do. So finally I turned on him and I said, "Good evening," or

"Buenos días," or something. He said, "How do you do, how do you do. I have a friend you would like to meet." I still don't know what that means. So I said, "Good. You do? Good." And we're still hungry, haven't yet found a place to eat. He said, "My friend, he is like you. And he's a chef at a hotel--" I said, "Where is he?"

[laughter]

MASON: Get you some collard greens.

WILLIAMS: I didn't let him finish. I said "Where is he?" And I grabbed that man and we went running up the street to one of the biggest hotels in Monterrey. When I got inside I suddenly thought, "God, I'm so anticipatorially in a hurry. "What am I going to run into?" I didn't have any idea. There was this big restaurant lobby, and then there was a hallway, and the kitchen was on the left side. This guy ran down, went in this kitchen, and he came out with the chef. I can see him now with his big high hat, cap and things, and all of this business. He came out, and I looked at him--I'm still in the lobby, and he's coming out of the kitchen--and we started running towards each other. We get together, and he says, "Uh."

[laughter] You're talking about love at first sight.

Well, he was wonderful. He was married to a Mexican woman who was a nurse. He invited us for dinner. I think there were seven courses to the meal with all the wines that

went with it. It was a wonderful meal. And every night we came in we were his guests for wine, and we had dinner, and then during the day they would take us on trips all around Monterrey. It was really wonderful. Then I left Rotha there with them when I went on to Mexico City.

SMITH: You came back from Russia to start a theater company, you said the last time, or to be involved with starting a theater company.

WILLIAMS: I was in New York. I was hoping I would get into a play.

SMITH: Then you got cast in the touring company for *You Can't Take It with You*. How did that develop? What was the network by which you got to find out about the part and audition for it?

WILLIAMS: Well, let's see. Let me think a minute. Well, I was with theater people, black theater people, in New York, and then many of them had come to Cleveland, so there was no difficulty of being tied up with theater. I was just-- I don't know when I joined Actors Equity Association, but somewhere I must have because--

SMITH: To be in that play you would have had to be in Actors Equity.

WILLIAMS: But before that, an interesting thing happened, or maybe while I was rehearsing it in New York. Some of the people from Actors Equity came to me and said,

"Frances, we have to have a parade, a big march, a protest march, on the business of desegregating theaters," so blacks could go. Equity was leading that strike, and they wanted a prominent name to address the thing. So they asked me if I would go see Adam Clayton Powell, and I said, "Of course, I'll be glad to." I didn't really know him.

SMITH: Is this junior or senior?

WILLIAMS: Junior. He was then. What was he? He had a very--

SMITH: He's a minister now.

WILLIAMS: I know he was a minister, he was a very important minister at Abyssinia Baptist Church.

SMITH: Then he became congressman, but I don't know--

WILLIAMS: But I was trying to decide if he was a congressman then--

SMITH: Yeah.

WILLIAMS: --or if that came later. I think it came later. But he was probably the most prominent black citizen in New York at that time. I went to see him, and I told him what we wanted and why. And he said, "Frances, that's a great idea." He said, "Do you know, I've been the chairman of the committee to desegregate New York," or some chore they had that had to do with discrimination. He said, "We haven't found anything to do." He said, "This

will give us a good thing to do." I always thought it was so wonderful that this man who ended up doing such a miraculous job in Congress didn't know what to do in New York, [laughter] and to see how he had grown and how people can grow and what they can accomplish in a very short time.

SMITH: What was it, was it theater by theater that was segregated or--?

WILLIAMS: Oh no, all theaters.

SMITH: All theaters.

WILLIAMS: I played Washington, D.C., during that period, and I remember Frances-- I think her name was Farmer. Her husband was the ambassador to Liberia. I remember in Washington when we were playing there, there was segregation in the theater, and blacks couldn't go unless they sat upstairs or something. And this woman had come by and asked me to go to luncheon with her at one of the restaurants in Washington, D.C. And I said, "Oh, Frances, I don't want to go through that foolishness. You know they aren't going to serve me." She said, "Well, we're going to just try anyway." Frances looked like a white. I said, "Yeah, you'll have no trouble! God, I'm tired." She said, "Oh, come on, let's go before you go to matinee today. I'll take you to lunch." We went in this restaurant, and you had a tray, and you selected foods

that you wanted as you went down the line. You had your water and your napkin and silverware, and then you filled the tray with the foods you wanted.

TAPE NUMBER: IV, SIDE TWO

APRIL 29, 1992

WILLIAMS: We were in this restaurant, Frances and I, and I got through the line with all the things I wanted to eat for lunch. She'd gotten by; you see, I told you what she looked like. When I got there, I think about five waitresses pounced on my tray, and everyone lifted something, and the whole tray went up in the air because the only thing left on it was the knives and the forks and the napkin. I had been weighted down, you see, with all this food. And they said I couldn't eat there. Frances said, "Well, we'll have a suit. We'll just, you know, sue them." Well, I still hadn't had my lunch, and I had to go to matinee and work all day and night. I never remember about the suit or what happened. In fact, I think her husband died soon after that. But this was the kind of thing Equity was fighting. I guess that's why I told you that story.

SMITH: But when you were touring, would they book you in different hotels than the white cast members?

WILLIAMS: Yes, many times we had to stay with black families. But later we had no difficulty. We had difficulty, but they would take over a section of the hotel or a section of a rooming house, and the whole

company would stay there. But on the road it was not easy.

Do you want to hear some of those stories about what happened in the South when we were playing?

SMITH: Yes.

WILLIAMS: I remember going-- Our trunks all got burned in Dallas, I think.

MASON: On purpose or--?

WILLIAMS: No, on the train, there was a fire. We lost everything. But what I was going to tell you about are some of the kinds of things that happened. We would go into a town, just going to play for overnight, and you'd have to go in and get your room set and your costumes in place and everything organized so you could work properly. We stopped by this drugstore in some little town. I don't recall the name of it, but it was one of the southern towns near Amarillo in Texas. We went in and said, "Oh, I tell you what. We can't stop to eat because we just don't have time to get ready and do all that." So we decided we'd go in and get a steak sandwich and a piece of pie and coffee and go to our dressing room and eat there. So we did, and the steak was good. We finished the show, and we were hungry again, you see. We decided that instead of taking the food out, we would go in this-- I guess it was a kind of restaurant, a bar-like place.

So I said, "Listen guys--" Because I was the only black. "Let's sit on these bar stools and I'll sit at the end and you guys sit on all the other stools, see." So that's what we did. We went in and ordered steak sandwiches. We said how good they were and we wanted these steak sandwiches. There must have been ten, twelve of us. And the young man that was serving us--a little boy, really, he was about seventeen, I guess--his boss called him over and told him something. He came back and he said to me, "I'm sorry, but my boss said to tell you that I can't serve you." I just went on talking. And he said, "I said my boss told me to tell you--" I said, "You've told me, darlin'." And I just went on talking, you know, and eating; I think we had been served. Anyway, we were eating something. Maybe it was salad, I don't know what.

So pretty soon the boss came over and said, "Pardon me, lady, but you don't understand. They'll put me in jail." So I said, "What do you suppose we should do? What's your suggestion? We all have our food. Do you want us just to walk out? What do you want us to do?" He looks down and saw all these steaks, and he said, "Well, um." He looked around and there was a round table, a big round table. He said, "I'll tell you [what], why don't you all just sit here and finish your steaks." And we all

sat down at this big round table and the boy brought all of these things over and we finished our steaks.

And this youngster came to me while we were eating, he said, "You know, my brother plays football." I said, "Good." "Wouldn't you like to see a picture of my brother?" It was his way of saying he didn't feel like this too, you know. But it was so charming the way he tried to handle it and not hurt my feelings. It really wasn't his fault, you see.

SMITH: Was this in the 1930s we're talking about?

WILLIAMS: No, it was later than that.

SMITH: Well so, in the fifties?

WILLIAMS: Well, it may have been-- Yes, it had to be because I came back in '36. So it was around that time.

SMITH: This is with *You Can't Take It with You*?

WILLIAMS: Yeah, this was with *You Can't Take It with You*.

SMITH: So this was before the movement had started to desegregate the South?

WILLIAMS: Oh yes, way before that. I was thinking of another incident that was interesting, or at least it happened. There were so many-- I guess we had one from Los Angeles. I was going to Chicago from Los Angeles and we had difficulty with the fog and the plane couldn't continue its journey and they landed in Amarillo. And as we were going down, the stewardess or the-- What do they

have on planes?

SMITH: Flight attendants.

WILLIAMS: Flight attendant. Anyway, she said that they didn't have food--they hadn't planned food on the plane because we were going right straight through to Chicago--but that there was a restaurant when we arrived down below, a very good little restaurant, and we could have breakfast there. I thought, "Fine." So I went into this restaurant.

Again, it was kind of a U-shaped counter, and I sat on one end of it and ordered. The waitress said to me, "I'm sorry but I can't serve you here, but if you go in the room in the back I can see that you get what you order." So I again pulled out my cigarette and lighted it and started smoking and I just sat there wondering what the hell I should do, when this waitress came up and said, "I told you to go in the back." I said, "Yes, you told me, but I didn't tell you anything about where you could go." She said, "What--?"

Just then I looked across and saw this flight attendant and the captain getting their breakfasts at the other end of the counter. I went over to them. I didn't know a damn thing about interstate laws or anything. I said, "You people have gotten yourself into an awful fix here. You'll have a big lawsuit because you've brought

passengers here to be serviced and they can't be." And she said, "Well, what do you mean, Miss Williams? What do you mean?" So I explained to her what had happened, and she said, "Oh well, I know exactly how you feel. I'll tell you what, if you go in the back I'll go with you." I said, "You don't understand how I feel. I'm not going--" Just then the waitress came with sausage and pancakes or waffles or something. And I said, "Do you know, this happens to be just what I was going to order? So I'll just take this, and you can sit where I was, and I'll just eat this." And I did. I sat there and ate my breakfast. When I finished-- I was finishing up and the man on my left said, "Madam, I'm from Canada. May I order you another cup of coffee?"

When I got on that plane, you could really feel what was happening. You could feel the people, you know-- Either glad she'd fought or-- I mean-- But it was a feeling. Like you pick up a piece of dough. It was so defined that you could feel it like that. But that's how I got out of Amarillo that time. And we landed in Chicago.

SMITH: The South was probably the worst, but weren't there problems of that sort in the North as well?

WILLIAMS: To a degree you still had it in the North. I remember-- Not Alice. What was the name of the young

actress who died very recently? We were playing in Chicago and she would go by this restaurant whenever she had a matinee and pick up a sandwich and take it to her room, as I did. And this day she came over and said, "Well, they canceled the matinee today, so I can just eat here." And the waitress said, "Oh, I'm sorry, we don't serve you here." She said, "Why?" She said, "Well, the other people don't want to eat with you." And she leaned over and she said, "Do any of you all don't want to eat with me?" Nobody said a word. She said, "They don't mind at all, let's eat." [laughter] One time in New York-- Hilda. Hilda was her first name. Anyway, in New York once she was in, I don't know, someplace. I won't say names because it may be incorrect. But she sat there, and the waitress didn't want to serve her. They were all at a circular table I think. Anyway, she got served because there was a protest from all of this group, and when she got ready to pay the girl, she said, "Here, honey, and here's a \$2 tip. Now, that's for you and your education, because you need it."

MASON: Oh, oh. [laughter]

WILLIAMS: Yeah, we had quite some times. I can tell you more about the Mexican trip, but I don't know whether you'd be so interested in that.

SMITH: I wanted to find out more about *You Can't Take It*

with You: who was in the cast with you, and how you prepared your role, that sort of thing.

WILLIAMS: Well, of course, I had just come back from the Soviet Union, and I was determined I wasn't going to do anything that had any dialect in it. So I took this part in *You Can't Take It with You*, and the first words I said as I come out the door of the kitchen are "Goddamn those flies in the kitchen." [laughter] That was such a good line to come out on the stage with when you'd gone through the things I'd gone through.

MASON: What part did you play in it?

WILLIAMS: I don't know, the maid? What other part was there? The maid--

MASON: Oh, right, right.

WILLIAMS: --and there was also a man. And the name of the man, I loved. You know, George [S.] Kaufman [and Moss Hart] wrote the play, and he had a man that played in almost every play that he called his rabbit foot. He looked very much like Stepin Fetchit. It wasn't Stepin Fetchit, but it was a man very much like--

SMITH: This was the person who played Donald?

WILLIAMS: Yes. At this time with me, with this company, was a man named--you couldn't ever guess a name like this-- [James Carl] "Hamtree" Harrington. Hambone, Hamtree. I think it was Hamtree. Well, it was either Hamtree or

Hambone. Hamtree Harrington. Oh God, everywhere I'd go I had to introduce Hamtree. [laughter]

SMITH: Do you remember who played Mr. Vanderhof?

WILLIAMS: Yes, Papa-- Wonderful old man. And the mother-- I have the pictures of that cast. I've just forgotten. Bobby Ernst was in that. And I'll tell you who played in our company later, George Stevens's daughter, Gloria. I don't know whether you know him or not, but he was a very important director at Warner [Bros. Pictures] or somewhere. And his daughter didn't want to use her father's name. Maybe his name was different. I've forgotten. But he directed many people. There's one picture he did, and he cast a white woman, Flora something or other, in a part that should have gone to a black because she had to play the part of a black woman. But anyway, Gloria Stevens, I've seen her since. She's so wrinkled you almost feel as if the wrinkles were ironed in her face. I don't know what-- I think it may have been just bad cosmetic products. But I've never seen so many wrinkles on anyone like she has. She was a very fine person. Gloria Stevens, they called her. It was a good cast, and we were all very supportive of each other. They were kind.

SMITH: I'm wondering in a play like that-- As I recall, Reba and Donald don't have a lot of lines, but you're on

the stage a lot. How did you approach the problem of developing a stage presence in a play that's about a bunch of oddballs?

WILLIAMS: If you're an actress you just do it, if you know your craft. And A. Philip Randolph loved me in that play. He followed me all across the United States. He always said that I was the actress he'd rather see come down the stairs or go up the stairs-- Or when I came on stage he knew where I was coming from and when I left he knew where I was going. I thought that was always very nice. And he did, he followed me all across America with that.

SMITH: What was your basic approach to that character? I guess you had to--

WILLIAMS: Just one of the family kind of thing.

SMITH: Just one of the family, yeah.

WILLIAMS: Yeah, I'm sure, I know it was. Everyone-- They were all goofy people that came in, but they belonged, and I did too.

SMITH: How long were you in the part? Was it for four years?

WILLIAMS: About. A good four, maybe five. I did a lot of summer stock with it.

SMITH: So you were in different companies?

WILLIAMS: Oh yeah. Well, in summer-- I don't know what

they do in New York now with summer, and I haven't done much theater in New York now for a long time, but we used to-- Summer stock was wonderful. I went up to Connecticut and upstate New York and all sorts of wonderful places. You'd go into a situation where the new company would rehearse for two weeks and then play for two weeks, so that you were always overlapping. You could visit with the new company coming in, you see, and they could visit with you. And then you could see their performance and their rehearsals. It was really very nice. Do you remember [Alla] Nazimova? "Nazi-mo-va" in America they used to say. She was a very famous French actress. She played at one of the summer stock theaters in a production, and we became quite good friends. She was the woman who taught me more about lighting a set than anyone else, I think. She was very good, and she taught me many things like if you're going to do comedy, don't isolate yourself. Become a part of all the people around you because you need their support. These are things you don't really get in school, you know? But she taught me many things like this that have helped me all through life.

SMITH: At that time were you also performing in the independent black theater in New York?

WILLIAMS: Well--

SMITH: Did you have time for other productions?

WILLIAMS: No, no, you're working full-time. You don't have time.

MASON: You have *Show Boat* listed on your résumé among the films. You were in that production in '36 with Paul [Robeson]?

WILLIAMS: If you don't stop whispering to me--

MASON: Oh, that's because I'm not sure of myself.

WILLIAMS: Well, get sure, chick. [laughter]

MASON: You have *Show Boat* listed on your résumé under film acting, and that was done in 1936 with Paul Robeson.

WILLIAMS: No, no, no, no.

MASON: Uh-huh.

WILLIAMS: That was a different production.

MASON: Okay, so this wasn't actually the film.

WILLIAMS: That was before I came to Hollywood.

MASON: Right. So this was the play--

SMITH: You were in the '51 production.

WILLIAMS: I was in the '51 production.

MASON: Uh-huh, that was a play, though, that wasn't a--

WILLIAMS: No, it was film. With Agnes Moorehead and Ava Gardner.

SMITH: There were two film productions.

WILLIAMS: Yeah, two film productions, and this is the one with Ava Gardner, Kathryn Grayson, and Howard Keel. The

chap that played opposite me was a very fine guy from Buffalo, New York, and a very fine singer, and at one time was married to Leontyne Price. Bill-- What was Bill's last name? [William C. Warfield] I see him at intervals. But he had just come back from a tour of Australia, and it was his first film. He thought he had to act all the time. You know, he played piano and sang. He was just always singing for everybody and playing for everybody, and I thought, "That fool, why doesn't he stop and be his cotton-pickin' self!"

I had a wonderful hairdresser--we were friends. She was a great woman, Elizabeth [Searcy], and we talked about it. And Marian Anderson was coming to the [Los Angeles] Philharmonic [Orchestra] here, for a matinee. I said, "Look, Bill, why don't we go to hear Marian Anderson? And come by the house for dinner either before or afterwards." He said, "Fine," he'd like to do that. I wanted him to respect Searcy, and he wouldn't even say "Good morning" to her. You know, these people who really don't know how to behave on a set-- And it's hard to tell a man, "Damn it, speak to everyone!" You know? How do you do this? But anyway, so we went to see Marian Anderson together, came back and had dinner, and I said, "Oh, you know Searcy said something about your hair. You wash it every day? Because it's getting thin and she says you're not doing it

correctly." He said, "Oh? What else did she say?" I said, "I don't know, ask her." And I knew that would get them together because it was so personal, and everyone's concerned about their hair coming out. So they ended up being very good friends, but it was interesting how you had to plan it to do it. This foolish man, you know. They were like this [indicates with a gesture] after that. And it was good for him; he needed it. Because I would leave a producer and go speak to an extra. I'd say, "Excuse me" and say, "How are you this morning?" You know, I didn't want anyone to think that I didn't respect them and their work too.

SMITH: Was your first film with Oscar Micheaux your first film work?

WILLIAMS: I think yes. Uh-huh.

SMITH: And was that *Lying Lips*?

WILLIAMS: And there was another one. I did two, but I can't ever remember what the other one was.

MASON: What was the theme of it?

WILLIAMS: I don't remember. But that one I remember. On *Lying Lips*-- Langston [Hughes] saw it in Chicago. And I had to smoke a cigarette, and when I smoked cigarettes, I didn't-- You know, some people just smoke cigarettes and put them out. I smoked them until they were down to about a quarter of an inch from the end. And he said, "All

right, kid, what was their budget? Couldn't they buy you any more cigarettes?" [laughter]

Another thing that happened about that Micheaux picture on the West Coast-- There was a man by the name of Ben Carter. He was a comedian here. And he was one of the first black people to buy a big house on--what do they call it?--hill--

SMITH: Oh, by West Adams? Near where the Clark Library is?

WILLIAMS: No, but what was the name of the hill that was so famous--? Sugar Hill. Ben Carter is a comedian. He bought this house that was so grand that it became a showplace, and when anyone came to town, if they could they wanted to see Ben Carter's house. So my brother-in-law came to town with my husband, and they wanted to see this place. So I called him and arranged to take them over. When we got there Ben Carter wasn't there, but the man who took care of the house while he was away was, and he let us in. And the way he looked at me was horrible. I didn't even know him, and I couldn't figure why he looked at me like this. So he went through-- We went upstairs and downstairs and all the rooms of this big house, and every time he got near me I'd get this horrible look. So finally we finished and got to the lobby going out, and I was thanking him. I said, "Pardon me, did I

ever know you before?" And he said, "No." I said, "Did I ever do anything to you before?" He said, "No, but you played in that *Lying Lips* and you were horrible to that woman." [laughter] He was-- The way-- He was so mad. The hatred that he'd held all that time since he'd seen that picture.

MASON: Poor guy. Well, you said audiences were different back then.

WILLIAMS: God, that was funny. "The way you treated that poor girl." [laughter] So that's the rest of *Lying Lips*.

SMITH: Were you involved with the Federal Theatre Project at all?

WILLIAMS: When I came back they were going full-- Oh well, some. I mean, from the outside actually. I worked for the Federal Youth Project with Ruth St. Denis. We were all teaching there. I taught drama for radio; we didn't have television, I don't think. And I taught for radio and theater just a little, towards the end of it. But I used to go out for the big productions like *Native Son*, for instance. I knew Richard Wright. Richard Wright and, I think, Carlton and I went together to see a rehearsal of *Native Son*. We were sickened by it. Orson Welles was directing. And what he had done was to highlight each episode or every part of the play without a

buildup or a reason, or a-- What's the word I want? You couldn't see why his actions were-- There was no-- I don't know why this word escapes me.

SMITH: Motivation?

WILLIAMS: Motivation is the word I want. You never got any motivation for anything. He was just a thug and a horrible man without the motivation. And that's what came out. We were just sickened. But Richard Wright said, "Fran, now you understand. Never let your material go unless you have control over it." He said, "I did with Orson Welles a carte blanche, and I can't say anything." That's why it came out the way it did. *Toussaint L'Overture* was the other big federal play with blacks in it. It was a magnificent play. And they did *The Blacks*; I didn't see that then.

SMITH: I'm not familiar with *The Blacks*.

WILLIAMS: Oh, it was a very important play. Those three I guess are the most important plays from the--

SMITH: You weren't-- You just went to see them?

WILLIAMS: I just went to see them because I was then on the West Coast.

SMITH: Were you involved at all with the John Reed Clubs?

WILLIAMS: Here?

SMITH: Here.

WILLIAMS: No, I knew about them, but I wasn't a part. I

remember once-- I was very interested in some of the progressive things. They had streetcars in Hollywood then, and I was stepping off the streetcar and this little woman came up to me and said, "Aren't you Frances Williams?" And I said, "Yes." She said, "Well, I want to advise you to stay clear of any of the progressive things here, because they'll just do damage for you in the field in which you want to work." But I did lots of things anyway.

SMITH: I was wondering if you were in any of Langston Hughes's plays, like *Little Ham* or--?

WILLIAMS: No, I just helped him with plays mostly. And *Mulatto*, I was with him a lot during that period. And who was that wonderful woman who played that role? Mercedes something or other [Mercedes Gilbert]. Tall, fair woman. Then when Abbie Mitchell did *The Little Foxes* with Lillian Hellman, that was the first big part that was written for a black woman on stage in an integrated play. And I stayed in that dressing room. I was in that theater a lot. Abbie was a great woman. She was a singer who had sung in Europe and in Russia and was a graduate from Oberlin College. An exceptionally well-trained woman, and Lillian Hellman wrote that part for her. And for me-- The interesting thing is I did it in Hollywood, and then twenty years later I did it in Washington, D.C., and that

was an experience.

SMITH: So did you premiere the play in Hollywood?

WILLIAMS: I don't know. We played it here just as you play any play in Hollywood. But I did play it here in Hollywood.

But the second time I played it-- See, historically, I knew where we were going, what was going to happen. And we're coming into the sixties, and I knew where everyone was going. And instead of having the man play-- Let's see, what's the--? They didn't have an older actor to play the part of the servant in that. They had a young chap who'd just finished high school and was in college, and they wanted to do makeup on him. And I told them if they put makeup on him it would look like a high school play, you know. It would just cheapen the whole thing. So I got the part changed to the younger man. He could be himself. And then what happened is that I got the girl and this young chap kind of relating to each other so that there was this thing coming through of unity between youth and black and white. I changed that whole play without changing a line. I'd done that before. But I would change a whole play and not change a line. Do you know much about blocking out for a director? They have a triangle thing they use, and they'll pivot the-- The key

person would be here at the end of the triangle like this, and the next important person would be here or here, and then the others would filter around. I ended up being in the pivotal spot with Abbie because I knew where she was going. You know, they'd sit on the porch reading this play, and I said, "The difference between you and me is I know where it's going. You don't." [laughter] And when we got the notices and the reviews came out, I was in every single paper, well received. And reviewers said they didn't know there was so much for Abbie to do. Abbie hadn't added a line.

And one time I did a similar thing. It was interesting. There was a man by the name of Howard who worked for the United Nations. And there was a very reactionary group called-- What were they called? Anyway, they'd come in and buy-- Cyd Charisse and all that crowd were a part of it, really way far right. And they would come in town. They bought the whole building on Figueroa [Street] with swimming pools and hotel rooms and kitchens, and when they catered, baby, you wanted to take a picture of everything you ate. It was that beautiful. They had a repertory company and a block of plays that they used. And they had one black man who was doing a part in an African play which they had. And Howard, my friend who had just joined them, called me and said, "Fran, I'm in

town. They want me to do a part in this African play." Oh, I hope I can remember the name of that group. "And I said I would do it if you would help me." And I said, "I will help you." So he came out, and the play was as reactionary as you can-- You couldn't imagine what they did with that black figure in there. I used their own words and got a completely different interpretation on it and a different focus. It is such fun to do.

SMITH: Now, which play is this?

WILLIAMS: It was this African play that this reactionary group had in their group of plays they were doing.

SMITH: Like something by Wole Soyinka?

WILLIAMS: I don't remember. Now I don't even remember the play, but I remember this character. He was a nigger, you know, I mean really. We worked and we worked and we worked, and when they got to London--they were going to open it there--he said the audience was quite noisy, and then the play started, and it got quiet, and you'd hear the quietness. He said they got so quiet, and finally when the play ended they didn't know what to do. Then when they talked to him the next day, they were still baffled because they couldn't find an extra word, and yet the whole play had been changed. So what they did was to drop it from their repertory of plays. But I enjoyed it.

They got it one time in London. [laughter] It's something about fighting fire with fire. That was fun. I've done a lot of that.

TAPE NUMBER: V, SIDE ONE

MAY 13, 1992

MASON: We didn't talk about the founding of the Harlem Boys Club Theatre the last time, so I was wondering if you could talk a little bit about that.

WILLIAMS: I'm trying to remember the name of the man who was the director there. A very fine-looking, tall man. Who was that? They built this beautiful building, and they had a department for theater with an auditorium and workshops and dressing rooms and all the trimmings. And they asked me to head it up, so I said I would. I knew the kind of red tape that goes on in places like that, so somewhere in one of the pigeonholes of my mind, I lit upon the idea of looking through-- This was sponsored by the Children's Aid Society, which is probably the largest and most prestigious group in New York for children's welfare kind of work. What I did is to get the membership from all of the different agencies that this group handled and discovered who were the artists on the boards of the various ones. The ones, again, that were the most prestigious I invited to be on my board for the theater. Anyway, it was probably the most helpful thing that we did because we did things like-- The Children's Aid Society had a camp, a wonderful summer camp, and they never

allowed blacks to go to it. So I decided I was going to have a workshop and I invited young adults from different settlements, different centers, to come and be on kind of like a citywide board. And we got this famous camp that belonged to the Children's Aid Society, and went out there to write a play. Well, I got some of the best writers, the best dancers, the best musicians, and it was that kind of group that composed the staff of the camp project. And we went out there and wrote a play, the children with them.

SMITH: Do you remember the subject?

WILLIAMS: Yes. We ended up doing a play that took place in the Statue of Liberty. And it was very exciting, really. I wish I had a script of it. But one of the things we discovered in doing this was that in Ireland-- I think the thing that impressed most especially the black youngsters was that in Ireland they had what they called bush teachers. Did you ever hear of bush teachers? I didn't really hear about the same kind of teaching until I went to Angola, where they had the same kind of thing happen. They wouldn't allow them to teach the children, so they'd have to go into the woods and hide in the bushes with the children in order to teach them.

MASON: What were they teaching them?

WILLIAMS: Regular schooling. A, B, C, what have you.

But they were called bush teachers because they had to hide to do it. The government wouldn't let them do it, you see. They couldn't teach the Irish children.

MASON: So you're saying that--

WILLIAMS: This goes way back to the whole religious, Catholic business, you know.

MASON: Okay.

WILLIAMS: And Ireland had always been under great, great, great struggle. But for our children to hear this-- These are the kinds of exchanges and discussions that we had that just opened their eyes. "You mean the whole world's like this?" "You mean this is happening, people act like this, everywhere?" The whole thing was so educational. The play came out very successfully. We did it, and then I moved to Los Angeles right after that. I really regretted it in a way ever since, but that was a great experience to have. And you see, they couldn't stop us from saying anything we wanted to say because we had the support of all these great people on our little local theater board.

MASON: So the performance took place out at the camp or--?

WILLIAMS: Yeah, well we did it at camp and we did it in town, but we wrote and we put it together with dance and music and writing at the camp. We wrote the whole play in two weeks. That was probably one of the most exciting

things. Then another thing that happened there that might be interesting is that Ruby Dee and Brock Peters used to come to my workshop. There weren't that many black theater workshops and they came there too and many, many--

SMITH: They must have been very small then.

WILLIAMS: Oh, they were children. Oh, they were young, yes. And actually that plant that's dying here is from-- Right in front of you--

MASON: Oh, this one.

WILLIAMS: This was the end result of putting a star in Hollywood for Brock Peters. I spoke a couple of weeks ago there. I was one of his first teachers in theater. There were so many exciting things, but it was such fun to work and to feel supported. And no one could interfere with me. That was really a stroke of genius if I say it myself. But always remember, when you can't get things through, baby, go to the highest places you can get and get support of those people. It will save you many headaches and help you get through. It was a very nice center. Just to go into a new building anyway in Harlem was great at that time. Gregory, the man's name was Gregory--I don't know if that was his first or his last name, I think it was his last name--that was director of the center at that time when it was first built. And I haven't seen it since.

SMITH: Was Harlem your home base for most of this period after you came back from Russia, would you say? You were touring a lot, I guess.

WILLIAMS: Yeah, I started going right out on tour, but Harlem, I would say, was my base. Yeah, I'm sure.

MASON: You were saying that you weren't involved in the Federal Theater Project, but there were other things--

WILLIAMS: Yes, I was, at the end.

MASON: Uh-huh.

WILLIAMS: You see, I didn't come back until '36.

MASON: Right.

WILLIAMS: And then I did-- They didn't have television then, so I trained people for radio.

MASON: Oh.

SMITH: Was this part of--? There was a Negro Theater Project that was--

WILLIAMS: No, I didn't work there, I worked at the Youth-- What did they call it? They had some initials that they used. I don't know, New York City Youth something or other. I don't know. But that was part of the-- What did you just ask me?

MASON: The radio-- I know that you have on your résumé that the U.S. War Department sponsored something--

WILLIAMS: Oh, that was later, that was something else. That was a private thing that I did with Noble Sissle

and--

MASON: Bill Robinson?

WILLIAMS: Oh, that was a great, great crowd. It was the first coast-to-coast production that had ever been done on radio. Remember that wonderful man that for a short period was the head of the War Department in Washington, the first black man? He appointed Noble Sissle and me to do this production. And we did, and it was exciting because it was about the war, of course. And we had black actors speaking in German and in French--and this had not been done before, of course--and in English, some of them knew English. [laughter] But it was an interesting project. We had a full symphony with that great man who was a director who finally had to go to Europe in order to get work as a director of symphony. I want to remember his name. He was great. I remember at one time during our final rehearsal, he had to work in Washington, D.C., that morning. And he was coming in the afternoon to do the final wrapping up of the whole production. And we were tense. I was trying to get this thing done with all we had: the singers, a full symphony, all of these actors like Juan Hernández, Canada Lee, Ann Brown, you name it. If you were anything in theater you were in that production. And it was a lot of responsibility, because I was, what, about twenty-nine years old. So as I said, we

were very tense, and our director of the symphony couldn't be with us at that first putting together-- I call it the puzzle rehearsal. I remember Bill Robinson-- As I said, everybody was uptight, just everybody. It was a big event. And Bill Robinson was going out the door, and he came back and he says, "Oh, by the way," and he told a joke that was as funny as anything you've ever heard, and we all had to laugh. And it broke all of that tension. It was so brilliant. You see, this is a real man of the theater, and you don't ever think of Bill Robinson that way, you know. But this man knew it was time for a joke, and he did it, and it worked. And I think ten minutes after that, this man Louis-- I can't remember-- This director from Washington arrived and he took over that orchestra. You wouldn't believe that a conductor could make such a difference in a sound, but he was so brilliant, and the artists in the symphony were so cooperative. They must have given everything they had because it was just beautiful. And I think we were all just nonplussed at the difference from one director to another. I'd never seen or heard that kind of contrast because you don't have an opportunity to hear it like that. But it was beautiful, it was just beautiful. The play went well.

SMITH: The goal of the production was to build support

for the war effort?

WILLIAMS: It was for the War Department.

SMITH: For the War Department. Was it directed towards an African American audience or a general audience would you say?

WILLIAMS: I think it was just a production, but an unusual production. Noble and I did a number of things together. He was quite a guy. He always told me, "Frances, don't always try to make money." He said, "Get the job done and try to do it at a dollar a year." He said, "Your weight is of more importance, your knowledge is of more importance than a few dollars."

MASON: Well, he was quite wealthy though.

WILLIAMS: No, but you find ways to, different ways-- You're creative. You're a creative person anyway. I've never had to ask anybody for anything, you know. And I haven't had as much as a lot of people but, honey, no one's had a richer life. [laughter] And part of it is having people like Noble to tell you things like that.

SMITH: How did you feel about the war? I mean the war effort and--

WILLIAMS: At that time?

SMITH: Yeah.

WILLIAMS: Well, you see, my grandfather had lost four sons. Remember, one time I told you I think in our

talking that he had lost four sons in the First World War to--what was that?--"for democracy." [laughter] There was something about that was why the war. He lost four sons, so I was very bitter about the war. And I remember later my mother, of course, didn't want my oldest brother to go. She prayed and prayed and prayed I think day and night. And do you know that on his birthday I think it was, the war ended before he had to go. I mean, a day or two before he had to go in.

SMITH: This is World War II?

WILLIAMS: That was World War II.

SMITH: Did you think some improvements might come for the black community?

WILLIAMS: Improvements?

SMITH: Improvements as a result of the war.

WILLIAMS: No. I mean-- But then we were all fighting for recognition.

SMITH: Right.

WILLIAMS: And I mean, Ben Davis-- We had the guys later go into the air force. I had a child from the settlement, from Karamu House, who came out here to be a flyer. He was a parachute jumper, and they rigged his bag so that he got killed. I mean, it was rough. You paid a price for equality. It was too great a price, I think.

SMITH: You didn't have any illusions about "the four

freedoms"?

WILLIAMS: Hell, no, [laughter] though I worked very closely on a number of big projects with Earl Robinson. No, "the four freedoms," that takes me to another place and a wonderful man, Lewis Allan, who wrote for-- Oh, what's the woman with the flower in her hair? Billie Holiday. And when she sang "Strange Fruit," Lewis Allan was the man who wrote it. Now, that made more sense than most things to us. Do you know the song?

MASON: Yeah.

WILLIAMS: Let's see, what else about that period--

SMITH: Were you involved at all in this--? What was it? In 1941, A. Philip Randolph threatened to organize a civil rights march on Washington if [Franklin D.] Roosevelt didn't do something to begin integrating.

WILLIAMS: Well, you see, I knew A. Philip Randolph, so I was involved. Not really involved because I was in theater a lot, but I remember that very well.

SMITH: I think, as I've read, there was some dissatisfaction that he actually called the march off.

WILLIAMS: That he what?

SMITH: He called the march off because Roosevelt did issue--

WILLIAMS: Yeah, well, then he got weaker, you see.

SMITH: Yeah.

WILLIAMS: Often when you get power you give to the person who gave you the power. But I remember once going to an AFL-CIO [American Federation of Labor-Congress of Industrial Organizations] conference, a major conference. This seems removed but that leads me into it. We all were at large tables. I was with [Actors] Equity [Association] and the theater, and we had this large table. At the table behind us, I looked around and discovered they were all representing the laundry. And I went over and I said, "It's very interesting, but are there any blacks in this group?" [laughter] I said, "You see, my mother was a laundress, and my people have done this kind of work probably to a greater degree than anyone else in this country. So I was interested to know who was on your executive board representing blacks." And they said, "Well, uh, well, this is our literature. Now, you see, we have one here, oh, and there's one here in this department--" And they went down the list, and it was the same man. [laughter] In every area [there was] the token man who had to divide himself up because he was a good yes-man, you know. But I made them face it. I just stayed at that table until I could get the results and shout it out.

MASON: Did they ever get anybody else?

WILLIAMS: Oh, later. Yes, of course, but it's been

uphill. And that's why that fight with Frederick O'Neal in Actors Equity-- Have I told you about that?

SMITH: No, no.

WILLIAMS: Well, I was out here then, and Ralph Bellamy, who had been president of Actors Equity Association for many years, decided that he was not going to run. So we waited around a while, and finally Fred O'Neal said, "Now, Ralph, are you sure you aren't going to run?" Ralph said, "No, man, I'm tired. I ain't gonna run no more." And Fred said, "Well, if you aren't gonna run, I think I'd like to try it." And Ralph said, "Go ahead, man." But what happened is that all the white actors got to Ralph and said, "Man, you got to run. We can't let that black man in here." And then of course Frances got very angry. [laughter] And we started again. So I headed his [O'Neal's] campaign on the West Coast. And Wellington-- What's this guy's--? Wellington was on the East Coast, and we were back and forth and back and forth. I was on the executive board of Actors Equity then out here, on the West Coast. Say that to me again later and I'll tell you another story. Anyway, it was pretty uphill, but after he said that he was not going to run, he decides to run. Ralph Bellamy decides to run. So I said, "The son of a gun, we'll fix him." So we did a really-- It was quite a campaign. I remember there was one man on the board who

was an attorney, and I remember him standing up and saying at this big meeting, "Well, I tell you, I've worked with Frances Williams for quite a long time. Now, we haven't been in agreement always, but she never shoved anything under the rug. And so I believe her."

Years ago my mother had a friend out here, the only person who I knew out here who knew my mother, Louise Brooks, who I should tell you about later. But Louise decided to get together one hundred black women for the Democratic Party. And they were so successful and they worked so well that they decided to let them nominate a black man for assembly or council or some elected office. And the women got together to decide on who this should be, and they couldn't decide. They simply knew the people too well, you know, they knew them intimately. That's a good thing about having different ethnic groups or nationalities, because they pocket themselves and you know when they go to the bathroom, you just know. So one would say, "But don't you know he has that woman on the side? Don't you know this?" and all this kind of business, and they couldn't decide on a black man to endorse. So finally this friend of my mother, Louise, said, "Now listen, folks, we're going to have to get this cleared up, because you know one thing? There are a hell of a lot of white sons of bitches. I think we can afford to have one

black one. [laughter] So we're going to settle this thing today and get us a black man to run even if he is a son of a bitch." [laughter]

So when I was heading up Fred, you see, to run for the board I told this story about Louise. I said, "You know, we've had so many white sons of bitches, it's about time we had--" Even though Fred had all this training in business as well as in acting, and was a very competent actor, but a good businessman-- He's got all the best qualifications. And I said, "But if he was this black son of a bitch, there have been enough white ones for Fred to run." And I think that's what won the vote on the West Coast. I think that story--

SMITH: Did he win?

WILLIAMS: He won. You're damned right. He was the first black national president of any union. Yeah.

SMITH: When was this approximately? Nineteen fifties or sixties?

WILLIAMS: It had to be. It had to be somewhere in the fifties because I was on the board for about twenty years, and I was there in the fifties and sixties. So it had to be in the fifties.

SMITH: We had wanted to ask you about the founding of the Negro Actors Guild.

WILLIAMS: The what?

SMITH: The Negro Actors Guild.

WILLIAMS: In New York?

SMITH: In New York.

WILLIAMS: Yeah, I was one of the founding members of that. You see, all of the ethnic groups, like the Catholic actors and I don't know what other groups, maybe Episcopalians, but they had all these groups. This money was being put aside and there was no black group to take it. So they organized a group. Noble Sissle was the dollar-a-year-man organizer for that, and Leigh Whipper. Edna was the first executive secretary. It was her sister that married Adam Clayton Powell [Jr.]. I'm trying to think of her name.

MASON: I have a list of some of the people who were on the board.

SMITH: Actually, do you have the list with you?

MASON: Yeah.

SMITH: Maybe you could give it to Frances, and you could sort of look down the list. So the Negro Actors Guild was in a sense an affiliate of Actors Equity?

WILLIAMS: All of them I think were, all of them were. Actors Equity allocated certain moneys to these various groups, I think that's the way it went.

SMITH: So its primary functions, were they social or political or both?

WILLIAMS: Both. It was mostly, I would say, social, not political. Because they were very diversified.

MASON: Here's [the list of board members] for 1938.

WILLIAMS: Noble Sissle, Fredi Washington was the person I was thinking of who was the executive director-- Bill Robinson was in that group and Ethel Waters, who never did anything, but she was great. Yes, Marian Anderson, Louis Armstrong, Duke Ellington, Abbie Mitchell, J. Rosamond Johnson I knew well, and James Weldon Johnson.

SMITH: How many of those people were sort of, like, their name was there for the prestige--?

WILLIAMS: Well, this last group. The real workers were Noble Sissle, Fredi Washington-- James Weldon did a lot, Paul did a lot. Edna Thomas replaced Fredi Washington when Fredi went on the road with *The Member of the Wedding*, I think. Reverend [Adam] Clayton Powell Jr. was on, and Muriel Rahn, my word, and William C. Handy. I just reread a book of his that I have had fifty years, autographed. [laughter] Oh, my word. Oh, this is very-- And Geraldyn Dismond. Oh, and here's [James Carl] "Hamtree" Harrington. [laughter]

MASON: Yeah, your friend. [laughter]

WILLIAMS: That's my friend. Geraldyn Dismond was married once to a Dr. Dismond in New York who was successful as a doctor and traveled a great deal to the islands and all

over the world. And Geraldyn did too. Then they separated, divorced early in life, and Geraldyn had one of the first penthouses in New York. She had a bar that had over \$1000 worth of liquor all the time, and then that was a lot of money. I could tell you stories. Anyway, during the World's Fair she was in charge of the black history week productions, and I was her assistant. And we couldn't find any modern dancers, modern ballet or anything like that. Everyone was a tap dancer. We went to Brooklyn, we went all over trying to find them. But I had come out from Karamu [House] in Cleveland where we had a group of modern dancers, modern ballet dancers. And I brought that whole group out to the World's Fair in New York. It was quite a hit; they'd never had blacks in ballet before. But Geraldyn, she had this wonderful party for the people who had helped work with her at that time at this famous penthouse. And she had a bartender who was a clairvoyant. You'd be drinking and he'd start saying, "Remember Tuesday when you did so-and-so and so-and-so?" You're talking about a strange feeling.

MASON: How unpleasant.

WILLIAMS: It was a great party. People like-- Marian Anderson was there. "Bricktop" [Ada Smith], I think Bricktop was there. What's the other woman who was so popular in France? Hunter.

MASON: Oh, Alberta Hunter?

WILLIAMS: Alberta Hunter was there. Marian Anderson had just married her schoolmate, who was an architect. They had just married. I think they're still married, together all those years. And, oh dear, I don't dare tell about all the things I did that night. But I remember my husband taking me home and saying at the top of the stairs, "What does one do with a drunken wife?"

[laughter] That I remember. But it was really good, it was a good party. But Geraldyn then headed the column in *Jet* magazine for many years, as the society editor for *Jet* magazine. And the thing I always hoped I'd be able to do that Geraldyn did was to have a man Friday instead of a woman when I got old. [laughter] But she had this wonderful man who took care of the house and did her typing and got her mail out; it was really great. There was something else about that play that we did with Noble that I should take a note on, and I don't remember now what it was. Do you remember? I told you make a note and I would refer to it later.

SMITH: You said executive board of Actors Equity, West Coast.

WILLIAMS: Well, I think it was about Fred.

SMITH: Yeah, okay.

WILLIAMS: I think it was probably about Fred, yeah. We

came across a letter there. I had such fun. I guess I enjoyed fighting, what do you think? [laughter] Anyway, we had a man named [Isadore B.] Kornblum. When I first came out here he was in charge of many of the unions like the American Guild of Variety Artists and Equity, and he may have been in charge of another one.

SMITH: Was he a business agent?

WILLIAMS: He was a lawyer. And he was just chairman of everything. He was a reactionary bastard; he was really bad. I remember once I was coming from somewhere during the McCarthy period, and they wanted me to sign this business everyone was signing, you know, you were not a member of the Communist Party, you were not this and this and this. The head of Equity at that time was a man by the name of Christopher O'Brian. He was Irish, and his uncle, his favorite uncle, was the head of the ACLU [American Civil Liberties Union] in New York. And when I was coming from the East, we met on a train. This was on a train coming to Los Angeles but we were just outside of, it seems to me, Minneapolis. I think that was the route; it went north, and then down. I was sitting beside a black man on the train and when Chris--who is very blond and blue-eyed, very fair--came through the train and saw me, he said, "Fran, what are you doing here?" and we grabbed each other. Do you know that man, that black man

didn't speak to me again on that whole journey? But Chris and I became even closer friends, you know. We ate together and we had cocktails together. We came out-- I remember we got off the train and I had one gray shoe and one blue shoe on and didn't know it. That was so funny.

But what was I going to say? Oh, Chris was an attorney. I told you his uncle was with the ACLU in New York. When I was supposed to write this letter or sign this letter, he said, "Frances, I'll write the letter for you." And he did and wrote a very good letter, but at about two o'clock in the morning I said, "I don't need anyone to write a letter for me." And I wrote my own letter, and when I read it with all of these people, especially the group that was setting up television--it was a cross-section of all the unions--these people were in tears. They were in tears. I told them about a number of things, about the Japanese, the Orientals, and the Asians having to have all white actors do *Rashomon*. It was ridiculous. "We've got capable people in these Asian groups who could do a much better job," and later I proved it. Because that was the first production I did with the East-West Players on the West Coast, and it was beautiful. That was such a beautiful production. But, honey, that's the time when the Actors Equity said that they didn't know what the hell they were doing. Did I tell you that? They

presented them with this document that they were applying to have the permission from Actors Equity to set up their own theater. And they said, "They don't know what the hell they're doing. Look, read this thing. It doesn't make any sense." And I said, "How in the hell could they know what it is when you got it all hogged up?" And they said, "Well, if it's going to be done, Frances Williams, you can just do it yourself."

All my life it seems to me I had trouble with my legs. Then I was on a broken leg and on crutches. Have you ever worked in an Asian home where everyone sits on the floor? Get up and down with crutches? That I'll never forget. But we ended up in a theater on La Cienaga [Boulevard]. We had a children's workshop, we had an adult workshop, we did plays. Those people were so well trained in production. I don't mean just as actors, but from the PR [public relations]--the box office--to the technicians.

SMITH: Is this the theater that [Soon-Teck Oh] Mako is--?

WILLIAMS: That's right. That's the reason it's there, because I fought for it. And I remember even the PR man developed so well-- He was a first-grade teacher. And he developed so well that Mayor Bowron--

SMITH: Fletcher Bowron.

WILLIAMS: Fletcher Bowron took him as a PR man for

himself. That's the kind of work we did. *Rashomon* was the first production and it was really sensational. It was sensational. It was a wonderful group; they taught me so much, and I think I taught them a lot. But they really were great. I learned a lot about Asian foods and how to fix them and all that. It's a wonderful thing about giving, you always receive so much in return. It's a wonderful way to live.

TAPE NUMBER: V, SIDE TWO

MAY 13, 1992

WILLIAMS: I was saying that everything they did was so beautifully done for their theater: the costumes, the finish on either side, they were beautiful. The flyers that the artists made were gorgeous. There was just love and beauty in everything. I learned things like you never beat things away from you, but always towards your heart, because that puts love in them. I mean, there were so many little things that I still retain and do because of this exposure. We had some great times together. And when the black women of the theater gave me my first award, they had this meeting at Marla Gibson's place. And it was just packed; they turned hundreds of people away. The date for it-- I was in Mexico just before that and I didn't want to come back. I was having such a good time in Mazatlán that I didn't want to come back to Los Angeles; if I come back for some tea and crumpets I'd be very unhappy. But anyway, I came back, and it was really one of the loveliest things that I ever had happen to me. They had a round crystal plaque with Langston [Hughes]'s crystal stairs on it. You know "Life for me ain't been no crystal stair"? You know that poem? Well, that was the kind of thing they presented to me. Mako at that time was

there and he said, "Yeah, she really put us on the map. We didn't know anything. One day I was driving her in my little Ford--" He had a Ford roadster and we were driving down the street and somebody almost ran into us. Mako let out a string of Japanese curse words and I said, "Oh, that won't do, man. You're gonna have to learn to do that in English." [laughter] He said, "She made me learn how to cuss in English." And at that time I had taken a course with [Frank C.] Laubach. Do you know Laubach? Laubach was the man who taught you how to teach any language whether you knew it or not to anyone. You first learned five hundred words and then it increased and increased and so on. It's a good course and I took it. And they brought-- As their relatives would come over from Japan and wanted to go to high school, I would get them ready for high school with enough English to achieve it. So I had a great time. Yeah, I had a great time. This little kitchen, if it could talk-- [laughter] Everything happened here.

SMITH: What made you decide to come to Los Angeles?

WILLIAMS: I didn't. My husband decided. He wrote me a note and said, "I'm going to Los Angeles. You better save your pennies." I knew he meant it, so I saved everything I could save and joined him. And I was sewing on the train. [laughter]

MASON: Why was he coming out here?

WILLIAMS: Just for the trip. He was a selfish son of a gun.

SMITH: This is Tony Hill?

WILLIAMS: Tony [William Anthony] Hill.

SMITH: How did you meet him?

WILLIAMS: I met Tony in Chicago. But he'd been with a group of social workers who went to Europe. They were in Helsinki while I was there. I didn't meet Tony, but I met many of the others. Then when they came back to Chicago they had this big party for me, and I came through with *You Can't Take It with You*. And there Tony was invited to the party, and that's where I met him.

SMITH: Was he already an artist at that time?

WILLIAMS: No, no, no, he was a social worker. And in fact I got him a job with social work in Albany, New York, later. And it was when we came out to the coast, actually-- He made me stay out because he hoped that an agent would get me and I'd make a million dollars. [laughter] It didn't work that way. He came out later and we lived in a housing project over at Long Beach [Boulevard], or Alameda [Street]. Anyway, that new housing project.

SMITH: Down in Long Beach?

WILLIAMS: No, it was right here. The street was Long

Beach, I think, or Alameda; I can't remember the name of it. But we took one of the first apartments in that new project.

SMITH: Did you want to come out here?

WILLIAMS: And Glen Lukens, who was head of the fine arts department at USC [University of Southern California], taught a class at the housing project, and Tony joined the class in ceramics. That's how he developed his ceramics and at one time was considered one of the six greatest ceramicists on the West Coast.

SMITH: Yeah, apparently he had quite a successful business.

WILLIAMS: He did, that son of a gun. The first year he made \$40,000. And he hid his things that he bought when he was going away. He hid his shirts among the towels in the bathroom, you know, all the new things he was buying. I'd lift something up, and here was a new thing. He was going to Mexico; he couldn't figure how to include me. [laughter] Oh, dear, that was funny to me. You learn, you survive.

SMITH: How long were you married to him?

WILLIAMS: Well, we were together for thirteen or fourteen years. He was very-- He was a brilliant man. He had a good mind, he was a musician. He studied piano all the time and played concert piano very well. And Tony was

daring. For instance, he would take his seconds in ceramics and sell them for more than he did the perfect ones because they were one of a kind. [laughter] That's the kind of son of a gun he was. We did lamps; I used to wire all those lamps. And we used to go through the alleys to get molds and boxes and odd shapes so that we could pour the clay and mold with it. We had some lovely things.

SMITH: What was Los Angeles like when you moved here in '41?

WILLIAMS: In '41?

SMITH: Yeah.

WILLIAMS: Tony wrote me from New York and said, "Now look, fool, when they say it's a--" What do they call it when they turn out the lights and you can't put the lights on again?

SMITH: Oh, the blackout.

WILLIAMS: Blackout. A blackout means to stay in the house, and I had been going out every night in blackouts to see what was happening. He knew what I'd do.

[laughter] But it was as if he'd been right by my side! He told me everything I'd done and was doing. [laughter] That was so funny. But oh, what a terrible time.

I remember some black schoolteachers, who were the blue bloods of the black people in Los Angeles, had gone on a

trip to the Orient or somewhere east. And they came back and gave a report, and what they brought back were these menus that were on the boat, you know. I mean, God, to be that dumb, you know, and they come up with these. "Oh, the menus were so beautiful." And then when they got to the curfew thing, the blackouts, they had the strange habit of-- You had to turn off the lights at night. But these are schoolteachers in Los Angeles, you know, people who should know something of what's going on. So I just couldn't stand the kinds of people that you had to-- Well, that my husband and I associated with. Oh God, it was awful. It was so bad and so distasteful for me that people who-- I can't stand phonies, and they to me were just a whole bunch of phonies. One or two you like, but most of them were awful. They were so bad that this same Louise Brooks that I told you about who had gotten a hundred [black women together], she opened really one of the first black eateries and businesses on the strip. They called it Mammy Louise's Seafood something.

SMITH: This is on Sunset Strip?

WILLIAMS: On Sunset Strip. I should tell you more about Louise. But Louise got very ill and she had opened this restaurant in the new Grand Hotel on Central Avenue. And I said, "It's all right, Louise. I'll take over the damn restaurant. You go to the hospital and get yourself

straightened out." So she did, and I took over the restaurant for six months. And I remember these biddies saying, "Tony, how can you let your wife, your wife, work on Central Avenue?" And he said, "She's grown, she knows what she wants to do." He was always supportive this way. SMITH: So Central Avenue had a rough reputation at the time?

WILLIAMS: To this phony crowd? Absolutely. And then what really blew their wig-- I had an Uncle Buzz, my stepfather's cousin. Uncle Buzz was my favorite. Uncle Buzz was the only dark member of the family, and he didn't go to school like some of the others. But he was a molder of iron. And there was this little island just off of Wheeling, West Virginia, and Uncle Buzz, who could talk without moving a muscle-- He could say, "You goddamn black son-of-a-bitchin' nigger," and never move a muscle. I used to go up and look at him like this as a child, you see, and didn't nothin' move. Uncle Buzz, as I said, was a molder in this iron place outside of Wheeling, and it was called Beach Bottom. So I used to call him "my Uncle Buzz from Beach Bottom." And Uncle Buzz was not only in charge of all these men at the foundry or whatever it was, but he housed them and fed them, and then on Saturday night took all their money playing poker. [laughter] So they didn't have a chance with Uncle Buzz.

Then many years passed, and of course I'd been to Europe, and I'd married twice, and I was in the [Grand] Central Market here and I looked up and here was Uncle Buzz, "my Uncle Buzz." We met and he had a bag like Santa Claus, a double brown paper bag full of money, dollars and half dollars. And as we grabbed each other this bag hit the floor and split and all these coins went everywhere. We got most of them, I think, together.

I'm still talking about these phony people out here: Loren Miller's wife, Juanita, Helen Garrott, [James H.] Garrott, the architect who was black, and a number of them. But many of them had come from Kansas and had gone to the University of Kansas together; my husband had too. And my husband's father had been a newspaper man; he had his own paper there, one of the early black papers. So they were all really hoity-toity fools. But they had this very society club which they insisted I be a member of and I didn't want to be a member of that club.

So when I met Uncle Buzz, Uncle Buzz had to have an operation. He didn't know what to do. He owned five shoe-shining stands downtown, and he didn't know what to do about it. And I said, "Well, Uncle Buzz, show me how to shine these shoes." And he said, "Oh baby, you can't." I said, "You show me how to shine the damn shoes," and he did. And I took over the main stand in the central market

downtown.

SMITH: Grand Central Market?

WILLIAMS: Grand Central Market. And I was an overseer for all the others and collected his money for him. I used to have a queue, a line of people waiting to get their shoes shined because this black woman was shining shoes. But you can imagine the shock of these phony, phony phonies. Ethel Sissle-- Noble was then living on the West Coast, but he had married a good-- Ethel Sissle was a fine woman, and they had a little baby out here. Ethel said, "Frances, therapeutically, nothing could have done me more good than when you started shining shoes at the Grand Central Market." She said they all almost had babies out of wedlock or something, they just had a terrible time. She said, "But it strengthened me more than anything that ever happened in my life." And I did it to refute them, to make them know they could not rule my life. I was going to rule my own life.

MASON: So is this a cultural group? Were they involved in a lot of cultural things?

WILLIAMS: Oh yes, yes, many of them were members of the group that, after, did the first two major exhibits I told you about.

SMITH: Jacob Lawrence?

WILLIAMS: Yes, the Jacob Lawrence and the other-- They

were all members of the Allied Arts group, the club that took over doing these later. They never did those again, but they've always done other things.

SMITH: They had a scholarship for a while, didn't they?

WILLIAMS: May have.

SMITH: What about the black film community in Los Angeles or the people who were involved with the entertainment industry? I mean, I presume that you wanted to be working in Hollywood.

WILLIAMS: Well, some of them were fine, some of them were really-- They were fine. I mean, I think most people do the best they can. We had Louise Beavers out here at that time, [laughter] and Hattie McDaniel and her brother, and Stepin Fetchit. And we had-- But they'd done some other big pictures with other New York actors. I was trying to think of the name of that picture that had-- There was a picture--a Hollywood title was in the name of it--that Paul Robeson played in out here. And of course Ethel Waters was out here later, and she did some very fine things. I think we ought to pick this up at another time because each thing is so full. I would like to tell you about things I know about Ethel and some of the other people that were all fine. And most people don't know-- Like I said about Bill Robinson and the joke. I've been in Bill Robinson's dressing room when his young man who

helped him would read him something from a book, and this man could memorize it almost word for word and tell you what page it was on. And no one ever tells these things about Bill Robinson, you know. But they should. I remember going to a Negro Actors Guild meeting. We had cocktails and then the meeting, or just the opposite, and Bill was there. A discussion came up about something, and he turned and said, "Hey, don't you remember on page forty-eight down at the bottom of the page where it said so-and-so and so-and-so?" This is the kind of mind that man had. It was brilliant. A brilliant mind. And Ethel's done similar things that were even finer than most people don't ever know about, and I would like to tell some of these things.

SMITH: When you arrived in Los Angeles did you plan on getting work in the theater and--?

WILLIAMS: No.

SMITH: No?

WILLIAMS: I didn't even know what Hollywood was when I came out here; I'd never even heard about it. I know why: I was interested in theater, not film.

SMITH: But your husband wanted you to get a job, so--

WILLIAMS: Uh-huh, he was a smarty one.

SMITH: But what kind of work was there available at that time?

WILLIAMS: I stayed out of it. Leigh Whipper got me a very good agent, Walter Herzbrun, who was probably one of the best agents in Hollywood. He had a brother who was the art director for Universal [Pictures] so that you always knew what was going on all the time. And Walter was fine, but I wouldn't work for five years, I think, because I wouldn't work with a bandanna.

SMITH: And that was the role--

WILLIAMS: That's what they were offering you. You'd go on a set and they'd say things like, "You know, I need a maid, I need a cook, or I need a laundress. Do you know where I can get a chauffeur?"

SMITH: They'd say this to you and other actors?

WILLIAMS: These are the kinds of things that they said to an actor. It was horrible. I wanted to kill everyone I saw. It was awful. Whew. I should go back again. If you want to start here the next time, this all starts out with Kornblum that I spoke to you about, and then the roles of the blacks and what it did to me. I think I'd like to do that all together.

SMITH: Yeah, the next time we were thinking we could talk about your motion picture work from the beginning to the end. Do it as a continuity--

WILLIAMS: Uh-huh. As much as we can.

SMITH: As much as we can. I had wanted to know if you

had been involved with the Harlem Suitcase Theatre when you were in New York?

WILLIAMS: No. I knew about it; that really came after I left.

SMITH: What about the Negro Art Theatre, the theater that Hughes started out here in Los Angeles?

WILLIAMS: Out here in Los Angeles?

SMITH: Yeah.

WILLIAMS: What about it?

SMITH: Well, were you involved with that? Is that still going?

WILLIAMS: Oh, yes. I was the executive producer of that group. It was interesting. We started at Ramón Navarro's old home that he had on Twenty-seventh Street. It was a beautiful place with tennis courts and all the trimmings. And he had his own theater, a well, well planned theater there, and we took over the theater. We did *Golden Boy* there. And that's when what's-his-name, Bill-- The guy who just died-- Anyway, I had to go fight with his agent to let him do the part, and then he ended up being on the board of SAG [Screen Actors Guild] because of the work. Many things happened.

SMITH: Do you have any more questions?

MASON: Well, I guess my questions were more about some of the cultural activities out here during that time, and

just about Central Avenue and what Central Avenue was like since that was such an important part of the black community.

WILLIAMS: Well, ask me about them then. I've been going like a house afire.

MASON: Yeah, well, I was wondering about--

WILLIAMS: Because I couldn't do it in a couple of minutes.

MASON: Okay.

WILLIAMS: It's too involved, it's too big a subject.

MASON: Okay, what if I just ask you about the show that you did with Jacob Lawrence. I just was wondering who--

WILLIAMS: Oh, all of that. All right, I'd like to tell you about that. All of these things are really full, you know. There's a lot to them.

SMITH: Maybe we're coming to a close. Yeah. I think so.

TAPE NUMBER: VI, SIDE ONE

MAY 27, 1992

MASON: We're going to talk today about your film career and start off talking about your work with Oscar Micheaux. We mentioned him the last time but I have a lot more questions about what it was like to work with him and how you got the role. Did he have just a general casting call or something like that? How did you find out about the film [*Lying Lips*]?

WILLIAMS: Well, I had come back from my road trip with *You Can't Take It with You*. I think he was probably looking for people who were in the business to the degree that he could. And someone had told me about it, and asked me if I'd go up to see him. I did and that was it.

SMITH: This is in New York?

WILLIAMS: In New York City, yeah.

MASON: He'd try to pick people who had been in the theater or--

WILLIAMS: Oh yes.

MASON: --had that kind of experience. Was that a difficult transition to work in film after having been in the theater?

WILLIAMS: No, not with him. I think there have been moments when I was very conscious of the limitation of

movement because in theater you cover space. And you do just the opposite in film; you have to be in the camera's eye. So it limits how far you can move. When they set lights and the camera's ready, you don't go wandering around to use space.

MASON: A lot of his productions were, how can we say, low budget compared to other Hollywood films then.

WILLIAMS: They were very low budget.

MASON: Yeah. And I was just wondering how was it to work with such a tiny budget. Do you think you made certain compromises because of having such a small budget to work with?

WILLIAMS: No, it seemed to me he paid pretty well people that he thought deserved it. I think he probably paid as much as he could, and it was reasonable.

MASON: Do you remember how much you got for *Lying Lips*?

WILLIAMS: I wish I could remember. But it was pleasant work. That part of it was pleasant--all of it was. Of course, I loved Edna Mae Harris very much, and I had done other things with her. She was probably the first black actress to work with Ed Sullivan. He was very fond of her, and he used her a lot.

SMITH: Was this before his television show?

WILLIAMS: Well, I think he was in his first television shows. He used Edna Mae as much as he could; he was very

fond of her. She was delightful and so attractive, and it was fun working with her.

MASON: How long did the film take to make altogether?

More than a month?

WILLIAMS: I think approximately that. From a month to six weeks.

SMITH: But you were not in all the scenes, so you would have only been there how many days, do you think?

WILLIAMS: No, we worked by the week. I know we worked by the week because I remember my salary came every week.

SMITH: Where did he shoot his films?

WILLIAMS: I think in Brooklyn, as I remember. There was a big old movie studio in Brooklyn that he used. It was adequate, with dressing rooms, all the things that we needed. And then I was wondering about-- There wasn't a commissary there, but we sent out for food. Or he did, I can't recall which.

MASON: How much rehearsal time did you have before you'd shoot the actual scene? And how many takes were you able to do?

WILLIAMS: Well, not as many as we take in Hollywood, unless it was a very bad actor or an actor who would be very bad. That's why he tried to get the best material he could locate that would work for him. Once in a while you'd get a man or woman-- I never saw a woman who was not

really ready to get in there and work and learn lines and behave themselves. But usually they did. It was a pretty good crowd. It was a good group.

MASON: I was asking about rehearsal time. Were you able to have a lot of rehearsals?

WILLIAMS: Oh yeah. How did he work out his rehearsals? Seems to me we had a group rehearsal, maybe not. But I know we rehearsed before we shot on the same day. I'm sure of that. But he was a very docile, very quiet, warm person. Maybe he got excited, but I never saw him. He was calm and collected and knew what he had to achieve and blocked it out and worked at it and did it very well. He had a beautiful wife--

MASON: Yeah, she was in *God's Stepchildren*.

WILLIAMS: Oh, she was so beautiful. They were so in love, and when he went out to build up the distribution of the film, they always rode together in this big Packard car. They drove all over, especially the southern states and the eastern coast.

MASON: So when you say he was docile-- If an actor or actress had something that they wanted to change about the script, say, was that okay with him?

WILLIAMS: No, he liked sticking to his scripts, as I remember. I think he would accept her suggestion but he was pretty firm, because he blocked out, and he knew what

he had to accomplish, and he knew his own time limitations in doing it. He was a good businessman as well as a good writer and director.

SMITH: For instance, in *Lying Lips*, you had people who had stage backgrounds, and then it seemed you had people who perhaps had nightclub backgrounds or entertainment, music backgrounds.

WILLIAMS: Mostly. In New York that's what you found a great deal of. You didn't find many people who had lengthy theater experiences. My advantage in New York was that I'd done so much with theater.

SMITH: Because it did seem-- It struck me in looking at it, there were two kinds of-- There were people who were projecting--

WILLIAMS: At the Apollo [Theatre].

SMITH: And then there were the people who just were themselves within the film.

WILLIAMS: That's right. Most of them were old actors, old vaudevillians like Cherokee and-- I can't remember the names of all of them, but if I heard them I would.

SMITH: And this was your first acting experience on film, correct?

WILLIAMS: Well, I did a little in the Soviet [Union], but not much.

SMITH: So did you do anything to prepare yourself for

acting in film? How did you conceptualize the job that you had to do?

WILLIAMS: I think I just handled it from my own theater experience and helped coach some of the other people.

[laughter] That's what I'd usually end up doing.

MASON: Were you happy with the role once you saw it in the theater?

WILLIAMS: I liked it very much, I enjoyed it. Langston Hughes wrote me after he saw it and said, "What was wrong with your budget? Didn't they have any money for cigarettes?" Because I at that time smoked Camels, and I loved smoking them down to the very end, and I was always continuously smoking the same cigarette. He said, "Damn, didn't they have any budget that could buy you a new cigarette?"

MASON: There's a long scene with you showing-- I think you were disgusted about something, and you're smoking a cigarette and--

WILLIAMS: Was I? I don't really remember. I haven't seen this for a long time.

MASON: It was a nice scene.

WILLIAMS: But I remember Langston laying me out about the cigarette. And I told you the thing that happened in Hollywood on that picture. About taking my brother-in-law to see the home of--

MASON: Oh yeah.

WILLIAMS: --Ben Carter. That was a funny one. No, they were a mixed cast; many of them were not people of theater. But many were vaudevillians and had been in that area.

MASON: Is there anything else that you could tell us about? I'm just trying to get a sense of what it was like, you know, an average day on the set with Oscar Micheaux and what that might have been like. Anything significant?

WILLIAMS: I guess I wasn't a very impressive person, you know, I don't think-- Even now I'm not affected by who people are and what they've done. I'm concerned about the person, but I'm never awed.

SMITH: What kind of directions would he give?

WILLIAMS: We would rehearse and block out the scene, and very little direction after that. Just camera markings, as I recall. But mostly, after rehearsal in the morning we went through pretty smoothly, as I say, with the exception of some of the vaudevillians.

SMITH: To what degree did he allow improvisation or encourage improvisation?

WILLIAMS: I'm not aware that he did that. Oh, he had to with those guys because some of them never learned lines. But I like to improvise, and to the degree that I could I

probably did. But he was pretty firm in what he wanted and knew what he wanted. He had to. Because he would rent the studio for a certain length of time, and he had to get out a certain number of pictures in that time to meet his distribution needs.

SMITH: So you worked in two films for him.

WILLIAMS: Uh-huh.

SMITH: Was the other *Rented Lips*?

WILLIAMS: *Rented*--?

SMITH: *Lips*.

WILLIAMS: I can't remember. *Rented Lips*-- Was Edna Mae in that?

SMITH: I don't know, but the title's on your résumé.

WILLIAMS: I just don't remember. *Lying Lips* and *Rented Lips*? I don't know.

SMITH: *Reckless Moment*?

WILLIAMS: Oh, I don't know.

SMITH: These are titles that we couldn't track down.

WILLIAMS: *Reckless Moment* sounds more familiar.

SMITH: When was the next time--?

WILLIAMS: But I did a *Reckless* something in Hollywood and I don't remember which it was. [laughter]

SMITH: I have two questions. One is, after you finished working with Micheaux, when was your next motion picture acting assignment, I guess in Hollywood? And the other

was, when was the next time you worked for a black production company, with an African American director?

WILLIAMS: Never, ever.

SMITH: Never ever again?

WILLIAMS: That I can recall. I worked for Sidney Poitier as producer of *Piece of the something-or-other in--*

MASON: *Piece of the Action* in 1977.

WILLIAMS: Yeah. Bill Cosby was in that, and Sidney was producing and directing. I'm trying to think what other black companies-- I [can] think of none.

SMITH: *The River Niger*, was that--?

WILLIAMS: Hollywood.

SMITH: Strictly Hollywood.

WILLIAMS: Uh-huh. No, I think I didn't have that experience because, well, they're just really starting to do black production companies now, you know.

SMITH: To what degree was *Frank's Place* a black-run show? To what degree did the direction--I'm not talking about the technical direction so much--come from a black perspective? To what degree were the decisions being made by African Americans?

WILLIAMS: Ah, that's a funny story, it's a very funny story. Hugh Wilson, of course, and Tim--what's his name?--

MASON: Reid.

WILLIAMS: --Reid were coproducers, and Hugh did a great deal of the directing. However, they had hired as many blacks as they could find as technicians, I mean people like stage managers. We had a wonderful light man on camera that was black, Turner. I liked him very much; he was capable. One time we were working I think at Wilshire Ebell [Theatre] or someplace, and the head cameraman did several things that he didn't like; he thought they were racist in concept. And he called him what he thought he was, and it didn't wear well. I think he quit, but then later they rehired him.

SMITH: The cinematographer or the cameraman?

WILLIAMS: The light cameraman. But he was very good. The second [episode] of that, you know, I didn't want to do. I decided not to do it unless they changed it.

SMITH: What was the nature of the problem?

WILLIAMS: Well, it was interesting for me because I'd never done this before, criticized a script to the place where I refused to do it this way. And of course it was my first major serial, and I didn't know whether they could sue me and take my little house and theater or whatever I had. I just didn't know, but I knew I wasn't going to do it. I called Hugh and told him that they'd have to change this; we just couldn't allow it to go this way. And he said, "Oh no, we aren't changing anything."

And we had quite a to-do about it.

SMITH: What was the nature of the problem?

WILLIAMS: I'll tell you about it. Pretty soon I got a call from Chicago from Tim Reid, who said, "Fran, can you just cool it until I get there?" And I said, "I have nothing to cool. I have made my decision and that's it." So you can imagine, the sparks were flying around, but I didn't say anything to any other members of the cast. I thought it was strictly between the producer, the director, and me. Let me tell you what it was about. They had a scene, it was the second episode, where Tim-- who had inherited this restaurant in New Orleans and went back to Boston, where he'd been living, to tie up things-- came back to be at the restaurant. This was the first night that he had returned and was going to meet his new clientele and all that sort of thing. He was upstairs getting dressed when someone rushed in and said, "Oh"-- whatever his name was in the picture--"Jesse Jackson's back." And he said, "Jesse Jackson? What do you mean he's back?" "He's here, man." He said, "Oh, great." And he said, "Let me hurry up and finish getting dressed so I can come downstairs." So he started down the steps and he said, "Is he in the dining room? Where is he?" And they said, "In the alley." And he said, "In the alley?" And he went out in the alley and they had this big old tomcat,

which they called Jesse Jackson. Now, this is at the height of Jesse Jackson's fame as a politician. Can you imagine that? No one else protested the thing. I don't know another member of that cast who said they wouldn't do it after reading the script. And we all read the script, you know, you had it. So I was so mad that Tim came back and he said, "I'm not cutting it." And finally the day they got ready to do it, it was eliminated completely.

Later, I said something to Virginia Capers, who was in the production, and she said, "Oh, Frances, you were their baby. Everybody loved you. You even went out to Tim's house for dinner several times." I said, "So?" She said, "Oh, they just love you; you can get away with anything." I said, "No, I wasn't so sure I could get away with anything." And I said, "Remember that second episode?" She says, "Yes, I remember it." I said, "Well, I thought I wasn't going to be working after that because I just told them I wouldn't do it unless they changed the script." And she said, "Oh, I remember that script, Frances. I protested too." I said, "You did? What did you say?" She said, "I said, 'Tut-tut-tut.'" So I said, "Oh thanks, that was a big help." [laughter] I'll never forget that. I really went through a time then. It was quitting time for me, and it was only the second one.

MASON: I can't imagine why someone would put a gag in

there--

WILLIAMS: Can you imagine? And think it was funny?

MASON: I mean, you wonder what people are thinking--

WILLIAMS: Oh, I know what I said to him, I said, "I tell you what, why don't you change the name to Jimmy [James E.] Carter?" "No." He's from the South, and he said, "What do you mean?" This is Hugh. I said, "Just what I said. This is my hero. Why not use yours?" And that really did it. I mean, talk about stubbing somebody's toe! Yeah, I said, "Let's call him Jimmy Carter."

[laughter]

SMITH: Now, was Hugh Wilson black or white?

WILLIAMS: White.

SMITH: White.

WILLIAMS: Uh-huh. He was a very nice person. I've had his children here for parties and all, you know. And we're good friends, but I'm telling you we had some comeuppance on that one. But that's the only one, I think, that I had that kind of problem with.

SMITH: Did you meet with the script writers ever, or often?

WILLIAMS: Yes, we had Ben Art Williams, who was a very good writer. [He's] done a lot of things out here. He had another woman, who was-- She didn't know whether she was black or white. You've seen these kinds of people:

she was very fair. I think she was half Jewish and half black, but she was very fair, and she came over here and we talked a while, and she was so confused that I-- We didn't become-- And yet I knew her husband and her child. They had worked with me here in poetry-writing groups, the husband had. He was a musician and he had a very good feel about music and the word that was interesting. But this woman! They separated; they had to. She was unbelievable. And she didn't last very long on the picture. You have to start somewhere that made some sense, and she couldn't.

SMITH: How did the confusion affect the script?

WILLIAMS: What confusion?

SMITH: Her confusion.

WILLIAMS: They wouldn't allow it to; they just didn't do her scripts.

SMITH: In terms of the character that you played, how much of that came--? Or shall I say, what came from you and what came from the producers and writers?

WILLIAMS: She was created, at least she was written into the script, of course, before I came into it. But I guess I fleshed her out. I hope I fleshed her out a bit. But people still talk about her an awful lot. I got on an elevator in Hawaii one day and there was a black man with two children getting on as I was getting off. And he

looked up at me and he said, "Oh, children, get off this elevator. I know this woman." [laughter] And so they all got off. I didn't know him and he didn't know me, but he'd seen me do Miss Marie, and she was really very popular. I tell you, I think one of the most wonderful fan letters I ever received was when doing Miss Marie in *Frank's Place*. This man wrote me from Pennsylvania and said that he wanted me to know that I had a home as long as I lived. He lived with his mother on this big farm outside of Pennsylvania and wanted me to come see them and included a check. And I thought that was really one of the greatest fan letters I ever received. But there were lots of very good letters. And after I'd been in it for a while, Tim called me in and said, "Frances, you know you have made this production a wholeness. You have made us a family. Most groups work together for several years to get the cohesiveness of belonging together as we have. And it's only your work." But this is what I work for--relationships--wherever I go, because if you have that and people respect each other and extend to each other and know what the other man has to give, and you can add to it or he can add to what you have, you have a richer production. And it worked, it worked in this very well.

MASON: I guess I'm wondering why the show didn't last.

WILLIAMS: We had millions of letters.

MASON: Yeah, it was a good show, and that's what they always say.

WILLIAMS: People even called from Washington, D.C. When we opened we got calls from black actors in New York saying they never thought they'd live to see this kind of production on television. I mean, we were swarmed. Even Roscoe Lee Browne called me and said, "Fran, my friends are calling my telephone off the hook about this production; they're so happy." Reactions were wonderful. And then when they took it off, the churches organized with letters all over. A man, as I said, from Washington organized a whole national group to work. We had millions of letters. I don't mean hundreds or thousands, we had millions of letters. It didn't do any good. I don't really know where the stop came from. I don't know whether, and it's possible-- Somewhere in the back of my mind I can hear someone saying how much they were paid off, Hugh and Tim. Now, it may be wrong, but that's what I-- They were bought off. They shouldn't have been. I don't think either of them will do anything in life more meaningful and helpful culturally than that. That was a good show.

MASON: Wouldn't they have made more money if they'd continued with a successful series and then sold it to Europe, and sold the reruns? It just really baffles me

because--

WILLIAMS: It baffled everyone.

MASON: Yeah, because that's what they say. If you don't like something, write a letter. If you like something, write a letter in support.

WILLIAMS: They were adamant about getting off the show, very adamant about it. There was no--

MASON: I guess we'll never understand the way Hollywood works.

WILLIAMS: Like big business everywhere.

MASON: But they were--

WILLIAMS: No, but it wasn't just money; there's also racism. They don't want you to have that kind of recognition, you know, and that we've been able to break through at all is a miracle. So, darling, don't think the path is golden. You're going to have some rocks in it. It just is there. It's part of the warp and the woof of the country. You have to be very creative and find many new ways of attacking it. And winning. Yeah, that was the deal. But I enjoyed what we did very much.

MASON: Well, I just have some general questions about working in Hollywood in the forties and fifties and what it was like. I mean, we were just talking about racism in the industry, for example, and that's always a big topic. But I guess I've always wondered whether the big studio

heads ever really understood--

WILLIAMS: What?

MASON: --what black people were complaining about?

WILLIAMS: They didn't give a damn! What do you mean, "what they understood?"

MASON: I didn't know if they understood but they didn't care, or if they just never got--

WILLIAMS: I think the same slice that you get in every part of this country is there and to a greater degree. Don't ever kid yourself about that. If you do, you're not wise.

MASON: I always wondered what kinds of scripts were you being offered in the fifties. I saw your film *Three Secrets*, which was done-- Well, not your film, but you were in *Three Secrets* in 1951. And I thought the way you played the housekeeper--

WILLIAMS: I don't remember. I had three "secret" pictures--all had secrets in them--that year. And I can't remember.

MASON: Well, this is the one where the three different women become pregnant out of wedlock. And there's a little boy who was adopted and who gets in a plane wreck and all these women think he's their own son. You don't remember that?

WILLIAMS: Is this the picture where a little boy and his

parents are in an airplane accident?

MASON: Yeah, that's the one.

WILLIAMS: Oh, that was an interesting one. Warner [Bros. Pictures] did that. The first thing that happened out here is that-- All these people were wearing bandannas. If you were in a picture and you were black, almost every woman had to wear a bandanna. And I refused. I had a very good agent, Walter Herzbrun, whose brother was an artistic director at Universal [Pictures], so that we got in on the ground floor of knowing what's happening. I did a great deal of work at Universal when I first came in because of this. But after I got an agent I think it was five years before I would do a picture because of this kind of treatment of blacks.

SMITH: The scripts that were sent to you--

WILLIAMS: Not only the scripts, but the way-- These damn bandannas! Hattie McDaniel wore bandannas, Louise Beavers wore bandannas, everyone wore bandannas, and I said to hell with that. So as I said, I just stayed out of it. I just didn't want to get into it. So finally I decided that you can't fight anything from the outside, that you have to get in the mess to do anything about changing it. That's when I first started working, and one of the first pictures was *Three Secrets*. I went out to Warner Bros., and as I said, they didn't know much about me out here.

[I] hadn't done anything. So I got into the waiting room, and it was full, and they had the *Los Angeles Times* on the coffee table, and I picked it up and opened it. Back then they used to have a photogravure section, just all pictures. And this time they had pictures about the cotton industry, two pages, not a black face on either page. Not one. So I looked at it, and I looked at it again, and then I started laughing. I laughed and I couldn't stop laughing. And everyone looked at me and said, "What's the matter? What's funny?" I said, "Look, look," and I just held the paper up for them to look at. And they couldn't see anything funny, as funny as I was laughing. Finally the doors opened, and the directors and the producers came out to see what was happening in the waiting room. I held up the page again and said, "Look, look, look, look, look, this is the cotton industry." And they said, "Yes." Nothing. So I said, "Do you know that the raising of cotton came up on the backs of my people? Without them you wouldn't have had a cotton industry. Now, show me how many blacks are in these pictures about the cotton industry."

By the way, since then I've learned an old folk story, a real story in California. They brought slaves out to California to make this the cotton state of the country. Did you know this? Well, they did. And the

blacks-- They wouldn't pay them; they tried to keep them practically as slaves. They made not any money that mattered. These guys developed and let the whole thing get to the blossom of the cotton, and they all walked off the fields. And that's why California is not a cotton industry state. Isn't that something?

MASON: So it wasn't an actual strike, it was sabotage.

WILLIAMS: Yeah, a protest. It was a real protest. What else was I going to tell you about? Oh, that picture. So the director said, "What's your name?" I said, "Frances Williams." He said, "Miss Williams, come in my office, will you?" So I didn't have to wait through all these people that were in the office. I went right in. He hired me. The first day we were shooting, I was sitting at the table waiting for these people to come. And the table was set for this big birthday meal when they arrived. All the knives, just like this is set now. The kids did this. The forks were on the wrong side, the spoons were on the wrong side, and the knives-- The whole table was incorrectly set. So I turned to the director and said, "Pardon me, but am I the person who would have set this table?" And he said, "Why yes, of course." I said, "Well, I wouldn't have set it like this." He said, "Well, what's wrong with it?" And I said, "Well, look at it." And he looked at it, and I said, "They're all

incorrectly set. You don't set a table like this." And he called the set man over and they all looked at this, and the stage manager and what have you, and they realized it was incorrectly set so they had the whole thing redone.

Then they wanted to do a close-up shot, and I-- You know, you hate to be a nuisance on a set. So I watched them take down the wrong walls to get the close-up they wanted. I sat there and I sat there. "Well," I said, "before they finish someone will recognize that they're doing it incorrectly." They didn't. No one saw that what they were doing was incorrect. All these big, paid technicians. So finally I said, "I don't like to be a nuisance, but I think you've taken out the wrong walls for this shot." The director said, "What?" And there was this big hullabaloo. So they called everyone in. Oh, everyone came in. "Oh, well, this is the shot we needed, at this angle. By God, she's right."

MASON: The housekeeper, she knew. [laughter]

WILLIAMS: By God, she's right. They had to build that whole thing up again and take out the walls that they had left in to get the shot we needed. The director said, "Pardon me, Miss Williams, but where did you get your training?" I said, "Oh, various places." He said, "Would you do me a favor and come and see my rushes every day?" That was *Three Secrets*. [laughter] That was the

beginning of Hollywood. Then I got a script one day. A messenger came with a script. And I sat up all night reading it and rereading it. There was not one word or mention of the name of me or the character. There was nothing in that script for me, nothing.

MASON: What were you supposed to do?

WILLIAMS: That's what I wondered.

MASON: Okay.

WILLIAMS: I cried the rest of the night. I was so hurt that they would send special delivery a script for me with nothing in there for me. I went on the set the next morning and I thought, "What the hell are they going to do with me?" And they ended up having me improvise all through the script. Burgess Meredith, Ginger Rogers, David Niven, all these people were in that.

SMITH: What was the title of the film?

WILLIAMS: [*Magnificent Doll*], I think. What happened was that one time I was in five places at the same moment because I had improvised and every actor wanted to work with me. So then they had to know what to eliminate and which one to keep because they were all at the identical time. Now, these are the kinds of things that happened to me in Hollywood.

MASON: What was that character that you were playing?

WILLIAMS: A maid. What else could it be? It wasn't

Dolly. [laughter]

SMITH: This was the film that you integrated the extras, right, and you got--?

WILLIAMS: Uh-huh, I think it was. This is the one where I came out in the deluge in the horrible illness. I think it was Philadelphia. Everyone was moving out of the place, and they had all these bags and everything they could find to get out. And I looked around at all of these extras, all of these people leaving the plague [scene]--

TAPE NUMBER: VI, SIDE TWO

MAY 27, 1992

SMITH: You said that you looked at the extras and--

WILLIAMS: All of these wonderful people. This happened right after-- David Niven's first wife had come out to California with him. They had a party at their home, and she opened the door for the guests to get their wraps out of the closet, and it was the cellar stairs, and she fell down, broke her neck, and died. And then we're doing a picture. You can imagine the tension. Well, he hadn't come on the set, but we were a wreck; we were really a wreck. A charming man, a wonderful man, and you just couldn't get above being aware of what had happened, you know. The first day he came to work I'll never forget. We were just, just tense, and he said [imitating a thick English accent], "Do you mind very much if I make a lot of noise?" I said, "I beg your pardon?" And he said, "Do you mind very much if I make a lot of noise?" Now, what the hell is he talking about? So finally somebody said, "Go ahead." You know, they didn't know anything. He started screaming in his big voice, "Auuuuugh!" It broke the tension, but I didn't know he was saying, "Would you mind very much if I make a loud noise?" And he did. Well, let's see, what else happened with *[Magnificent Doll]*?

SMITH: You were talking about the extras and the plague scene.

WILLIAMS: Oh yes, that's right. I looked around and I said to Ginger Rogers, "Isn't it wonderful how healthy the blacks were during this period?" And she said, "Oh, Frances, what do you mean?" I said, "Well, just look around. All this plague is going on, and everyone's dying, but no blacks." And she said, "Oh, oh, oh, well, that's--" That was just before lunch. After lunch they said, "There's a little hole out there trying to get some black extras." And then they infiltrated the whole scene with black extras that they wouldn't have done.

I'll never forget, just before that I was walking and I asked the, well, not the wardrobe man but the man who had charge of decorating the set if he would get me a big blanket and fill it with crushed newspapers so that we could have a great big ball of blanket. And of course, I was carrying it as if it weighed tons, you know, with everything they had. I was carrying this thing through this crowd, and finally David Niven came up and said, "Pardon me, but I just cannot walk behind Frances and see her carry this heavy thing. Do you mind if I carry it?" [laughter] Well, I'd created my prop and I wanted it, but I said, "It's all right." So he took it, you know, as if it was going to be heavy and the whole thing went up in

the air. I'll never forget that. That was funny.

I'm trying to think if that was the picture that Peggy Woods was in. I think she was. It was at the time when you couldn't get nylons, stockings. It was the war period; they weren't available. And whenever the wardrobe got stockings, if there was a pair left, it was just amazing that you could get them. Well, all of these gals that were in wardrobe would come to me with extra stockings. Well, Peggy Woods overheard it, and she said, "Oh pardon me, but tell me, do you have any extra stockings?" "Yeah, we did have some, but we gave them to Frances." Which didn't help much. But at the end of the picture, I remember I didn't know what to do. Everyone had been so kind to me, you know. They bent over backwards to really be kind. So I said to the head of all the technicians--I don't know what his job is now--"Pardon me, I'd like to present something to the crew because they've been so kind, but I don't know what to give them. You know I don't have a lot, but I'd like to let them know I appreciated what they've done." And he said, "Oh, no, no, you don't have to do anything." He said, "It was a privilege to work with you. Such a privilege that you didn't have to ask for much because we anticipated your needs and met them." Isn't that nice? So we weathered a lot of things.

I remember once going to MGM [Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer]. I walked into the secretaries, he called them and said come through, and when I got in his office, in his room, this man was writing with his head down, and he was writing on his desk. I just stood there and nothing happened, no one said anything. So I looked around this office. And right over in back of him on his desk was a picture that had a man who had a rope and it said something about, "Be careful of your crown. If it drops it might become a noose." So that tickled me, see, so I said, "Ha, tell me, do you decorate your own office or is it decorated when you get here?" And he stopped, the first time he stopped to look up, and he said, "What--? What do you mean?" I said, "I was just looking. I mean, did you bring your own pictures in? What did you bring in that belongs to you personally?" He said, "Oh, well, some of them." I said, "For instance, the one right behind you, is that yours?" And he said, "Well, yes. I've had it a long time, Miss Williams." I said, "It's really very interesting. I've never seen one like it." Well, that got me the job, you know. But it was these kinds of things: you just almost had to shake people loose in order to be recognized, and of course no one ever dreamed that you could be an actress with any training, you know. You just had to be a happening.

MASON: A what?

WILLIAMS: A happening. You just happen to be on the scene and they pick you up. I remember one time I was determined-- They had sent to France to get this maid's outfit with this little cap thing on, and I said, "To hell with that shit. I'm not wearing that." So I hid it. When they got ready for these scenes no one could find the damn cap. They looked and they looked and they looked; no one could find it. The head of wardrobe came in, she couldn't find it. Of course, my assistant, the woman who dressed me, she-- No one could find it. Finally the director came in and he said, "Frances, you know we sent to France to get this outfit for you. It's all handmade," and oh, he went through all this. I said, "Aw, why it must be here somewhere." And that fool picked up my script, which was thick, and the hat fell out. [laughter] He didn't say anything, and I said, "Well, I tried, didn't I?" [laughter] So I wore the damn thing. They put it on my head and my dresser said, "Girl, anything you put on your head you look good in." So we had some very interesting things happen. But it's always a struggle. When you first went on sets they would say, "Could you get me a chauffeur?" Or "You don't know where I could get a good cook, do you?" And you wanted to say, "How the hell am I gonna be informed enough to tell you about a good

cook and a chauffeur?" But that's where you were in their mind, you see.

MASON: Were there any parts that you wanted, but somehow couldn't get? I guess I'm wondering about this period. Supposedly, after the Second World War, things were getting better for blacks in Hollywood, and they were doing sort of more realistic kinds of parts.

WILLIAMS: You mean like they did *Hallelujah!* and some of those?

MASON: Yeah. And films about black soldiers in the Second World War, things that were meant to explore, I guess, blacks as kind of a social problem or something like that. Were you aware of anyone trying to make sort of a conscious effort to produce better parts or better scripts, better movies for blacks? I know Frank Capra did a film about black soldiers during World War II.

WILLIAMS: They were such little pittancees that you-- I remember Paul Robeson did a big thing on Hollywood. There was a part in it for Ethel Waters, and I could have done a part in it, but we looked too much alike and they couldn't have us in the same picture. I think it was called-- [It was] something about Hollywood. It was good. There were a number of things that came. The *Hallelujah!* was just before my period of coming here. But that was just at, I think, about the brink of it. Let's see. We were doing a

number of things. Of course, Dorothy Dandridge came out of that period. And then, this is interesting, when Dorothy Dandridge and Sidney Poitier were doing-- What were they doing, *Porgy*? I don't know if they were doing *Porgy*; it was a musical play that had been on Broadway.

MASON: Oh, was it *Cabin in the Sky*?

WILLIAMS: No, that was with Ethel Waters. It was after that. Sidney Poitier and Dorothy Dandridge had the leads, and there were lots of dancers in it. And they were not giving the dancers-- They were giving them the pay that they gave the extras. Here were these young people who had suffered to get money to pay for dancing lessons for years and years, you know, and suddenly they get a pittance for all of the work and time and money they've spent to make themselves-- To hone their craft for their parts. I wasn't in the production, but I had one of the dancers stay here with me at that time, and that's how I knew fully what was happening. And I remember I went to fight it, and I didn't get any help from those other two, who should have been leading the fight, I felt. But I got the salary that made it much better.

SMITH: Now, did you fight through the Screen Actors Guild?

WILLIAMS: Uh-huh.

SMITH: You were on their executive committee.

WILLIAMS: No.

SMITH: No.

WILLIAMS: No.

SMITH: Not yet.

WILLIAMS: No, I helped create the black caucus in the Screen Actors Guild. And Ronald [W.] Reagan, who was then president, dissolved it without even asking us or telling us. Isn't that interesting? But people like Virginia Royal-- There were a lot of very fine white actors who fought with us to have it reinstated. Now it's a very important part of the Guild.

SMITH: So this was after World War II, but in the 1940s?

WILLIAMS: It was in the early forties. It must have been early or late forties. Yeah, it had to be.

SMITH: I always wondered what your favorite roles were?

WILLIAMS: What kind of favorite roles?

SMITH: Well--

WILLIAMS: The role of money is about all I can see. In film? [long pause] I don't know any. Miss Marie came closest, and that was TV. I can't think of any part I had pride in playing.

SMITH: What about in *The River Niger*?

WILLIAMS: I didn't have anything that was important, that made any sense. I mean, it gave me-- I'm not elated about-- I had almost nothing that I can think of in the

industry. I did *Show Boat* and again refused to wear a bandanna, and they'd never done *Show Boat* with a woman-- you know, Joe's wife--without having her wear a bandanna. And someone--I think actually my dresser and hairdresser, who was always with me on shows--counted that I had refused 17 bandannas in that picture. They wrote it up later in-- What was the black journal? Not *Jet* but--

MASON: *Ebony*?

WILLIAMS: --*Ebony*. That I had refused these 17 bandannas and something about this business. I was at church one day and I saw two little girls say, "There she is, there she is. Yeah, that's the woman. She had 170 bandannas and she wouldn't wear 'em." [laughter]

MASON: So when you got a script you kind of knew what it was going to be, and so your goal was, what, just to make it as--?

WILLIAMS: Give it as much dignity as I could, to make it palatable. Or else I didn't do it. If I couldn't do anything with it, there's no point in me doing it, you know, because-- [You were] so busy being stereotyped-- They just didn't know. If you were black you were just a black thing, really.

SMITH: Was there ever any question of you playing a role that was not, quote, unquote, a "black" role?

WILLIAMS: Yes, we did some of those. I had agents who would convince them that I could do the role and add to it. So I did a number of those. I had a good agent. I've always had good agents until now; I have the lousiest agents right now. "What have they got to sell in an old wheelchair?" Oh, I could go on with stories like this. For instance, we were on the set--I don't remember the picture, David Niven was in that too--and these grips and technicians on the set would come out and tell the most vulgar stories that you just wanted to go out and regurgitate. I loathe dirty stories, [especially] when there's so many wonderful folk stories, and things, you know, that you could tell or talk about. But this guy would come over, he was a grip, and he and Louise Beavers used to exchange dirty stories. And I don't live like that. I didn't like it and I didn't do it. But I have seen-- For instance, when they did *[The] Little Fox* in the film, those people didn't want-- A Broadway actor that had worked with me at Karamu [House]--John, I can't think of his name--came out here because they wanted Clarence Muse to do the part, and he didn't get it, and they brought John [Marriott] out. There wasn't a scene where you could really see John. They'd have flickering lights or it was so bright it would blind you, and you never did get to see John. As a result he never got another part in Hollywood.

You never saw him, and he was a fine actor. But they tricked him, that's what they did.

SMITH: Were you in this production?

WILLIAMS: No, no. No, I never had that kind of-- Usually people liked me if they got a chance to know me. But I was saying this is what could happen to you, because I saw it happen to John. John was a fine man and a very capable actor. But I did start out to tell you something else when that came up. We were on the set-- Joe E. Brown, and I guess it was *Show Boat*. Joe E. Brown. Remember Joe E. Brown with the big mouth? We were on the set. I knew the Nicholas Brothers, and they had gone to Europe for engagements all over Europe. And then because they were working in Europe, they had to give special taxes to the United States, when they couldn't get any jobs here, you see. In the commissary we were all eating lunch and I said, "This is a damn shame that when a man can't work in his own country and he has to go someplace else to work, that he has to pay for it." Well, Joe E. Brown, he got up, he couldn't talk and that big mouth-- He almost foamed and fell over. "She's not patriotic," or something, you know. Patriotic? Hell, that's not the way to treat anyone. So, I mean, a lot of things like this happened. Did I tell you about [Isadore B.] Kornblum?

MASON: Sounds familiar but--

WILLIAMS: Kornblum was the lawyer who was in charge of almost all of the guilds.

SMITH: Yeah, you told us about him.

WILLIAMS: We were invited to a beautiful place for supper, the whole board of Actors Equity [Association]. It was a two- or three-story house, and you went into this place, you got on an elevator, the elevator went up the mountain, and then you got off at certain levels. They had all these fine homes. Very impressive. I remember the wrought iron staircase, and this whole house was lighted by candles. It was really very beautiful.

Kornblum went upstairs to the men's room or something, but he heard me say something, and the old fool fell down the stairs. He'd just see me and get choked up because he knew I was on to him. He's the man that I found later-- I made them hire a black secretary in Actors Equity, and she found a letter talking about *Cabin in the Sky* coming to do a performance here--I think it was *Cabin in the Sky*--and it went something like this, "A lot of dark clouds came to California, and I didn't know what to do about them. So I didn't think they ought to take out membership cards, because there wouldn't be that much work for them." I have that letter; I got a copy of it. I wish I could put my fingers on it, but that's the kind of thing that you got from heads, you see. It was awful. Oh, I hated it.

And the working at it to try to make it better of course I did through the unions. In fact, in Equity I set up, again, the black caucus arrangement. Then you had to train people to know what kind of questions to ask, you know, and what was possible, because they had been denied so much.

SMITH: I was wondering how the Hollywood blacklist affected you in terms of the--

WILLIAMS: Jobs.

SMITH: --jobs and the loyalty oaths and that sort of thing.

WILLIAMS: You see, my feeling about the blacklist is that we were blacklisted from the day we were born. These people didn't know what blacklisting was. They just didn't know. But we did because we'd always been blacklisted; we couldn't go there, we couldn't go here. If you got there, you were mistreated, and some of the other things I've told you about. I always said this whenever I got with a group of the "blacklisted," that they didn't know what it was all about: to have to go out and not know whether you were coming back alive or not because you happen to be black, because you've gone in the wrong bar.

SMITH: Yeah.

WILLIAMS: And they wouldn't serve you, and because you

were there they'd get out their guns. You got on a Hollywood bus-- One time, I was on a bus in Hollywood, and I was studying lines, which is what you had to do all the time, you know, if you were working in a play. I've worked in two or three things at one time. And they'd say in *Variety*, "Frances Williams is on her bicycle again, running from there to there." But what was I going to say?

MASON: You were just saying they didn't know what blacklisting was.

WILLIAMS: Yeah.

MASON: And an incident on a bus in Hollywood.

WILLIAMS: Oh, on the bus in Hollywood. I was sitting on the bus studying lines or something, and in the distance there was some kind of arguing going on, and I couldn't imagine-- I didn't pay any attention to it. Finally the bus driver pulled over to the curb, and said to three people who were on that side of the street, you know, as you get on the bus, "You people get off my bus. I don't have to drive you, and we don't behave like that here." And one said, "We don't sit next to no niggers where I come from." They'd been talking about me all this time, but I was unaware of it. But the bus driver-- They were so bad, he made them get off the bus, and then he told me what had happened. This was an awful town when I first

got here.

I remember my husband and I, we'd seen a play in New York on Broadway, and we moved out here and it was playing here. And we thought it would be fun to see it in another setting with some different actors and some of the originals. So we went, and after the theater-- It was at the Biltmore [Hotel], which is where all the big plays were then. We went to the Biltmore Hotel dining room for dinner, and we sat and we sat and we sat and we sat, and people came out and walked around us. Finally I guess the maître d' came over and said, "Pardon me, but you people don't live here, do you?" We said, "Well, why?" And he said, "Well, because you don't act like people who live here." He said, "We don't usually serve you." I said, "Well, if you don't want to serve us, you don't have to, but this is what we want and we'd like to have it." So they did serve us, but you had this everywhere you went in this town. It was just horrible, horrible. [tape recorder off]

SMITH: How did the blacklist affect you professionally?

WILLIAMS: I know it did, and I know I paid a price, and I know I paid a price for the stands that I took. But I wasn't aware of them, because there's so damn many stands to take-- You were so busy doing it that I know there were a lot. But I remember one day I was somewhere in Holly-

wood and a young actor came to me and said, "Hey, I hear you're in the bible." I said, "The bible? What are you talking about?" There was a book called [The] Alert that was put out by [Wilfred W.] Gibson and it listed all of these people that they thought were connected with leftist groups in Hollywood. He said, "They've got three and a half pages on you. So congratulations."

SMITH: Well, your two years in Russia alone would have been enough to disqualify you.

WILLIAMS: Yeah. Well, evidently I made this. But I remember one time they had-- See, they were just starting to use television. And they had this production called, I don't know, it was about current things that were happening in the city. This man Gibson himself was on the program. It was on a Sunday evening, and I came in with some other people. I guess I was the only black. This man came in with his hat on the back of his head, and it was warm, and he said, "Excuse me for wearing a hat." And I just turned my back on him. I didn't even recognize him. Then he said, "I understand this program is something about the Communist Party." I said, "That isn't what I came to talk about. I'm talking about--" What did I say I was talking about? I was talking about dealing with problems of oppression or something, I don't know. "Well," he said, "that isn't what I came to talk about."

Then he took off his coat and rolled up his sleeves and said, "Well, I got to get some homework done here." I don't know whether he took his hat off or not. But anyway, later as we were doing the show on television, they had this coffee table. This son of a gun would come out saying all the wrong things, you know, and just as he got ready to exploit it or explore it, I would say, "Oh, I beg your pardon. Would you mind, do you have a cigarette?" And he'd say, "Well, well, well, yeah." He'd get a cigarette, and I'd take it, get it ready to smoke. "Oh, oh pardon me." Just as he'd get his mouth open again I'd say, "Do you have a match?" Well, you never saw a man that got so frustrated, tripped him up everywhere he went, you know, until it went to such a degree-- I went to church, a big, independent church that was a fine church. Reverend Russell was the minister and the church voted me Woman of the Year because of that performance with that man on television.

Look at her face! [laughter] Yeah, I was rough, baby; you had to put your spurs on your boots.

MASON: When you first came out to Hollywood was that something that--?

WILLIAMS: No. You know, the thing that was so tragic about most of this is that the people who thought they were being blacklisted, too often their own behavior made

you realize that they were a slice of the same damn thing. I don't like to say that, but it's the truth. Too frequently this happened, and it was difficult to stay happy. Very difficult. I've gone to Hollywood to take someone a basket of wine and cheese or something and have one of the blacklisted say, "Well, what are you doing here? What are you here in Hollywood for?" "Well, I'm here in Hollywood. I go any damn place I want to go." But this is what you-- See, this deep-seated, unhealthy worm that gets in people, it's an awful thing. It's an awful thing. And you see, this is why you say you're really blacklisted if you're a black person, because you never escape it. It's always hanging on your shoulder somewhere that someone's thrown it. You either have to kick it or cut it or attack it some way. You see, you can't just let it go by. Yes, being in Hollywood in the early days was not easy. It was not easy. And that's why I'm so proud of Arsenio Hall and Bob Townsend and [John] Singleton and these people that have-- I hope we laid some groundwork for it, but it hasn't been an easy job. This has not been an easy job, and it isn't.

SMITH: When the Civil Rights movement finally gained national attention, did Hollywood begin to--? Was there any kind of opening up in terms of roles or in the kinds of subject matter in the early sixties? Did you notice

any difference in the motion picture or television industry? Was there interest in doing more serious--?

WILLIAMS: Oh, productions?

SMITH: Productions.

WILLIAMS: I don't know if there were. If there were I wasn't aware of it. That reminds me. Do you know John [Oliver] Killens, who wrote [*And Then We Heard the Thunder*]? He wrote a number of books, but one time his first book was out and they were having a big meeting at the Unitarian church. Many of the Hollywood Ten were there, and one of them said, "Mr. Killens, I have read your book and I don't see a decent white woman in it." And John Killens said, "Well, that's because I didn't know any." And that's the way it was. The Hollywood Ten didn't want him to write his book because he wasn't a known writer. We had to fight that fight. John said, "The hell, it's your story and you're going to write it."

SMITH: Well, what could they do to stop him?

WILLIAMS: I don't know, they just kept publicizing the fact that this man is not a writer and should not write his book. And most of these people were progressive whites, you see, so what do you expect from others? I didn't tell you about working on *Salt of the Earth*, did I?

SMITH: Well, I thought that we would deal with that at another time, because that's a--

WILLIAMS: This is a part of that, an extension of that. I'll tell you about that, then, another time.

SMITH: What about blacks in Hollywood in the forties and fifties trying to make movies? What efforts were being made--

WILLIAMS: To make their own?

SMITH: --to make their own?

WILLIAMS: Well, they didn't have money. It was very expensive.

SMITH: Of course, Oscar Micheaux did it anyway.

WILLIAMS: But he did it on the West Coast to a whole different distribution group, you see. There was no competition; they were completely different items. But here there was no one then producing or even with the thought of producing. I remember going to a director once and saying that I wanted to direct. And he said, "Frances, I read your résumé, you're better equipped than anyone I have on my staff. And I cannot give you a job. I cannot give you a job." I said, "You mean, I have to have cocktails with the right people and all that sort of thing?" He said, "I'm afraid that's what it amounts to. You have to come in as a part of a group, and there's no group to take you in." So it's interesting. I've had people trained at Karamu House in Cleveland who were white, who were in top positions on staffs in some of our

largest studios here, and I couldn't even get a job.

[laughter]

MASON: So there were basically no blacks working in the sort of technical side of film?

WILLIAMS: Not then. When we did *Salt of the Earth* I had to go to New York. There was a black documentary group of workers in film, and that's where I got one man to do stills and camera work in our production. I was determined we'd get one.

SMITH: Well, what was Carlton Moss doing? Was Carlton Moss here in Los Angeles?

WILLIAMS: Yes, but he didn't work on *Salt of the Earth*.

SMITH: No, but on other--

WILLIAMS: He was here, but he didn't work in the industry. He lived there, and he may have worked sub rosa with others, but he didn't come out-- I didn't know anything-- He was able and he did a lot of teaching. At one time he taught at, I think, three or four colleges every week. He would fly from one college to another to teach film. A great man. I want to do something special for him one day soon. I'd just like to turn a whole month in the theater for Carlton Moss. He's more than deserving. He's a great man, and he's trained, I don't know-- Most of the blacks who are doing anything in film he trained.

MASON: What about Ralph Vaughn?

WILLIAMS: Ralph Vaughn, yes. Ralph worked at Universal. He was a set designer.

MASON: I wonder how he got in?

WILLIAMS: I don't know how Ralph got in. I knew Ralph and his wife and his son. He was very fair, and he may have gone to school with someone. I think he had a good friend somewhere there. I knew Ralph, and we were all quite good friends. Yes, he did have a good job. He was a technician, he did set designs. I can't think of anyone else. But you didn't find any work that Carlton had done in the industry.

SMITH: Well, he worked for Frank Capra.

WILLIAMS: He did?

SMITH: Yeah, right when he started out.

WILLIAMS: Yeah. And he also worked some with Charlie Chaplin, I think.

SMITH: Uh-huh, that I didn't know.

WILLIAMS: I think he did. He and Charlie were very good friends.

SMITH: So you have a Chaplin story that you have to tell us, and maybe this is the time that you do it.

WILLIAMS: I was at the Circle Theatre. You know, they had a playhouse here called the Circle Players, I think. I used to work there, and Charles Chaplin was on the board

of directors, so that we got a chance to talk a lot there. A fine, fine person. And then his wife, his second wife-- Not Oona, I knew her, but it's the other one.

SMITH: Paulette Goddard?

WILLIAMS: No. It was another woman he was married to that I used to see very frequently. We'd often do Sunday afternoon or evening things in groups together. Gee, I've forgotten all those days. I almost went to Switzerland with him.

SMITH: How did that happen?

WILLIAMS: Well, because I was working at the theater, and one other chap, Ernie, who was there, said, "Come on, let's go with Charlie." And I wanted to, but I was married and I couldn't go. But I'd love to have gone.

SMITH: With all the difficulties, have you ever regretted coming back to the United States from Russia, or regretted not having gone to Europe and just lived there or moving to--?

WILLIAMS: Yeah, I wanted to stay.

SMITH: You wanted to stay.

WILLIAMS: I wanted to stay, but my mother was so upset here that I had to come home. And I didn't have money, that time.

TAPE NUMBER: VII, SIDE ONE

FEBRUARY 24, 1993

MASON: The last time we met you had just mentioned the Negro Art Theatre, the new negro theater, the Langston Hughes project that was out here. I suppose that was part of the whole Central Avenue sort of activity. But anyway, what I wanted to start off with is, you had a show of the art of Jacob Lawrence in the early forties. I was wondering if you could talk a little about that, where the show was held, how did you get the materials, who came to the show, and any other thing that you can think of that might be of interest.

SMITH: How you got to know Jacob.

WILLIAMS: That's interesting, I think. My husband and I were living in New York at the time and we heard about this Jake Lawrence. He was a very young man then, because that was in the late thirties, probably. Anyway, we found him on 125th Street near Seventh Avenue in a loft right next to the-- Oh, what do they call that train that runs above--?

SMITH: The els?

WILLIAMS: The el. He was practically beside it, this huge loft. We went up and he had pictures that he was working on leaning against the wall, supported by the wall

and the floor, so that all around this loft he had blocked out all of his pictures. He would put a bit of yellow in this one, and use that color wherever he could in the other pictures so that they'd be in harmony, the whole series. That was the Migration series he was first working on. So we looked at all these partially painted pictures and I said, "Where do you live?" He says, "Oh, I live here." I said, "Here?" There were all these pictures and things. I said, "You mean, you sleep here?" He said, "Yeah, I just roll out a sleeping bag or something, and sleep here." I said, "And you cook here?" He said, "Yes," he cooked there. So I said, "Look, baby, we live-- Here, I'll give you the address and the phone number. Why don't you just come down and spend weekends with us, and get some good greens and corn bread and get out of this setting." And he said, "I could?" I said, "You certainly could. You're welcome anytime you want to come." So that's how we met Jake Lawrence. Many weekends he came down, and often during the week he came down. So we got to be very good friends. Then when we came to the West Coast--I came in '41-- I think about '42 or '43, we decided that we would try to bring an exhibition of Jake Lawrence out, because they'd never done anything out here like that before. I really wish I had my program of the list of people that supported it.

MASON: In your résumé, you mention that the show was done by an organization that you had formed called the Allied Arts League?

WILLIAMS: No, that was later.

MASON: Oh, that was later, okay.

WILLIAMS: We did two such exhibits one year, and then the next year we did it, but we were working, and it was very difficult to handle that. That's when we brought in the Allied Arts. I don't think they'd been organized for a very long time. I think they were just a couple of years old or something like that. But anyway, we had people like Vincent Price, who had a gallery then of his own in Beverly Hills which he let me use for an artist for several weeks one time. A black woman--

MASON: Was she a sculptor or a painter?

WILLIAMS: She did everything, you name it.

MASON: Was her name Beulah Woodard?

WILLIAMS: No. She was an older woman. Thelma was younger. She was a dancer, she was a painter. She also wrote a symphony that was played in San Francisco by the symphony. She was a remarkable woman, strange but remarkable. In this cupboard I think I have one of the dishes. She painted a set of dishes for me. And then she did primitive art that was so exciting, big pieces almost the size of that window. Children would come in and look

at it, and start trying to do the things that the people did in the painting. That never failed. Children were so attracted to what she produced. But anyway, we had Ed [Edward] Biberman, Vincent Price-- We had a list-- Even New York artists were on the sponsoring list; it was very impressive. And Glen Lukens. Did you ever hear of Glen Lukens? From USC [University of Southern California]?

SMITH: Oh, yes.

MASON: Yeah, he's taught just about everybody.

WILLIAMS: Well, he helped us a lot. He lived at one end of Fifth Avenue and I lived at the other end. And this was not open. Exposition [Boulevard] didn't go through; it was like a park here. His end was a dead end too. One of the architects, [Raphael S.] Soriano, built his home there, and it was really lovely. So we did a lot together, and he helped very much in setting this up for us. We did it at a place that I had been working with children-- I was part of the setup for this studio at Normandie [Avenue] and Jefferson [Boulevard]. It was the old Spike's studio; many things happened there. But we had the exhibition there and it was the first time-- Well, we kept it there for six weeks. And it was just busy as it could be. [laughter] I'm laughing because one night Glen Lukens came over and said, "Oh, Frances, I know you're tired." I said, "Well, I hope I don't look that

tired." And he said, "Don't worry about dinner because when you finish, come over to my house, and I'll have dinner ready for you." So we finished that night and went over to Glen's. Glen was great with glass and ceramic dishes. He made a set of dishes that were all different colors but the same style, with the same silver, gold stripes that went around the top. And we sat down to eat. We had collard greens on toast in these beautiful dishes. [laughter] That's the first time I've ever had them served on toast.

MASON: On toast. That's a little odd.

WILLIAMS: But it was good, and we were tired, but it was a good-- But I always think of those beautiful dishes and having the collared greens on toast that we ate. There's so much of that. I threw a party there for Countee Cullen, the last party Countee Cullen had. We did it at Glen's home.

MASON: What was Countee Cullen doing on the West Coast at that time?

WILLIAMS: Out here? Some of the writers out here had been in school with him in New York. He had friends. And one of these writers told me that of all the people who had come out to write here-- He didn't get to write, and I'll tell you why. This man said, "This man was the most capable and able man that has ever come out here, and they

couldn't let him in the union because he was black." I should add to that [that] one time we went to the home of a man who was active in Hollywood. While we were having dinner--Paul Robeson and I were having dinner at his house--he was bragging about being the father of the Hollywood writers guild [Writers Guild of America, West]. And I was just about to take a bite of food, and I said, "That's impossible." He said, "No, Frances, it isn't. I really am." And I said, "Oh. Well, how does it happen there were no blacks in it if you were the father of it?" Paul touched me and said, "Let's eat, Frances. [laughter] Let's eat first."

SMITH: Is this John Howard Lawson?

WILLIAMS: That's right, that's right. Oh, I [can] tell you tales on him. His wife and he came here one time just as the [Joseph] McCarthy thing broke, and they were-- They had this big ranch-like home in the San Fernando Valley, but suddenly his salary was cut off. So do you know what they did? Sue Lawson and [John]--we called him Jack--came down here to that very door with \$10,000. That year my house had been in foreclosure three times, and I had no hot water because the tank had gone out. And here they came with \$10,000 for me to budget for them because I manage so well. That's a bitter one isn't it?

SMITH: Yeah.

WILLIAMS: I'm in real struggle. No one said, "Come, have \$100." It was terrible. That year there was a plumber on Jefferson [Boulevard]. I remember at Christmas he wrote me a note and said, "Frances--" Oh, and I bought the hot water heater from him. He wrote me this note at Christmas and said, "I want to give you this for Christmas because you're doing more in the community than I could do or anyone else I know. So would you just cancel the whole bill, the rest of the bill for the hot water heater, and that's my Christmas gift to you." Isn't that sweet?

SMITH: That's very special.

WILLIAMS: Yeah, but you know, it was so unusual. I had lots of lovely things like that happen. One woman-- What did she do? My oldest brother got killed at that time. His car-- He had a heart attack and went through a plate glass window and telephone poles and all sorts of things and he died. My husband and I had just been separated a short time, and I told him I had to go home. He said, "I'm sorry, I don't have any money." And the next week or two he purchased this big, eight-unit building on Vernon [Avenue] and Van Ness [Avenue]. Well, I was so crushed, and this woman had said-- I called her and she said, "Of course, Frances, anything you need, just let me know." She got the money for me to go home to my brother's funeral.

How did I get there? Oh, we were talking about Jack Lawson. They asked me to speak at his funeral, and I didn't know what to do. I was so torn; I really didn't know what to do. He had two sons here, and they know me, and they wanted me to speak. Well, I should speak, I guess. Well, everyone said, "Frances, try to, try to speak." So I did a speech. I wanted to say exactly what I thought, but I remember using a lot of Langston Hughes material, and I don't know how I wove it into the fact that-- Talking about this moon and the stars and the trees and the flowers, it's lovely for a poet, but we haven't time for that now. [laughter] We have to face some other things, and we have to say some other things first. So I wove that in some way, but I also covered the point that I didn't really want to talk about this. Some way. I just don't have the speech and I don't remember, but I did get it in, and I hope they got the message.

However, I admired him a great deal. Jack was a great man, and Sue, the last wife, was a painter. A very fine woman. She taught me-- Or he taught me, actually. He invited me over to their house for breakfast one Sunday, and there were all these people from all over the world, writers from everywhere. There must have been about eight. And Sue fixed a good breakfast, but in the midst of it-- She drank heavily then because Jack had been

in jail for the McCarthy business. She took to drink--

SMITH: Uh-huh.

WILLIAMS: --as a release. Sue said, "By the way, folks, while you're here I might just as well tell you, don't ever ask Frances Williams for a recipe because she'll leave out something so you can't make it as well as she does." I was so embarrassed I didn't know what to do. And Jack handled it. He handled it in such a way that he said, "I know you understand my wife's position. You must understand why she drinks, and you take it in your stride." Well, you know, it was so beautifully done that I've never forgotten the lesson. When do you criticize, and how much do you know before you criticize? Isn't that beautiful?

SMITH: Yeah.

WILLIAMS: I was so impressed with that, how with all these great people in that room, he handled it just as if this is the way she has to be at this time. She's earned the right to be like that. It was really a great lesson for me. But to get back to Jacob Lawrence, [laughter] I loved him so. We brought, as I've told you, the Migration-- I think there were sixty paintings in that series. He was here a couple of weeks ago.

MASON: Oh.

WILLIAMS: At the Baldwin-- Black History Week business--

Jake didn't come out for the show, but it was very well attended and very successful. The next year we did another exhibit, but they were from a Boston museum and a Washington [museum] and the Metropolitan Museum of Art, but by black painters or artists.

SMITH: Did you know Sargent Johnson?

WILLIAMS: Yes, I certainly did. He did a lot of wonderful things. Wall, usually--

SMITH: Bas-reliefs, I think. Statues and bas-reliefs.

WILLIAMS: No, but he also did frescoes. Didn't they call them frescoes?

SMITH: Oh, yeah.

WILLIAMS: Those huge walled, sculptured things, lovely things. Yes, I know him very well.

MASON: Richmond Barthé came out to live at some point.

WILLIAMS: Yes he did. Yes he did; we were very dear friends.

MASON: Oh.

WILLIAMS: Richmond. We have an exhibit of his. We have some of his things stationary at the Paul Robeson Center here. Richmond. He tells a story that one day he was so sick over too much booze. He said he was hanging over the toilet commode and he was so sick, and he turned his head and looked up and there was Frances holding a wet towel on his forehead. [laughter] He said, "I just came back. I

want to marry Frances." He was a great guy, really a very talented man. What else can I tell you about Jake Lawrence?

MASON: He didn't give any workshops or anything like that for other art students?

WILLIAMS: No, but he worked later up in-- Where was it, Portland?

MASON: Seattle, I think.

WILLIAMS: West Coast. There was something else about Jake. Maya Angelou came here one day, and I had purchased a whole portfolio of Jake's paintings and I said, "Here, girl." I said, "Pick one you want, but I think I know which one you'll pick." So she did. She likes horses. I think this was a series of John Brown-- Was there a John Brown series?

MASON: Yeah.

WILLIAMS: Yeah, well, it was one of those, one with the horses, and Maya was so pleased. She said, "You know, Frances, I know you didn't know it, but I just came back from Portland seeing Jake." When I went to her home in Winston-Salem--I spent a summer with her--I haven't seen anything more beautifully mounted and framed than Jake Lawrence's print. All the colors in the picture were included in that--

MASON: The matting?

WILLIAMS: In the matting, yes. You'd get little bits of all these colors until you got to the whole-- It was so beautiful. It's really probably one of the most beautifully framed pictures that she has. I didn't know it could look so good. I've seen Jake here a few times since I've been here. He was at the Afro-American [Museum of Afro-American Art] museum on Crenshaw [Boulevard]. And then this time he came out for Black History Week, but I didn't get to go, and he didn't find me.

SMITH: You had told me over the phone that Maya Angelou used to live with you.

WILLIAMS: Yeah, she lived here. That was two apartments. She lived in one, and Beah [E.] Richards lived in the other.

SMITH: So you had a very close relationship with her?

WILLIAMS: Oh, honey, I sent her to New York. When they had the uprising in Watts the first time, we wanted to go out and see it. And all the streets were blocked off, so we had to find how to get through these blockades, you see. We went through that together. And then we were both scheduled to do poetry at the big auditorium across from [the] Wilshire Ebell [Theatre] on Wilshire [Boulevard]. Anyway, we were both scheduled to do poetry that day, and we were trying to get through to Watts and get back in time to do the poetry. And we had to do the

same thing to get to-- What do they call that big auditorium? Anyway, to get there we had to go through the same thing, because I was living here and we were practically on the border where there were still all of these hold-ups with these guards and things. That's about all I can tell you about Jake.

MASON: Well, let's see. I guess I was also wondering whether the Allied Arts League-- Was Miriam Matthews a part of that?

WILLIAMS: Yeah, Miriam Matthews, Dorothy Johnson--they were the leaders, I'd say--and Helen Garrott and Juanita Miller, Loren Miller's wife. They were all the Allied Arts group. I thought at first that helped them to organize, but Miriam and I talked later and discovered that they had been organized before. But then they did take over this project.

SMITH: That group offered prizes to young artists, right?

WILLIAMS: Yes. They were a good group. And I guess they're still in existence. I spoke for them-- What's the museum in the rose garden, on Exposition? It's a municipally owned project. It has a ramp that goes up into the main room of the museum to get material in. And what they did with me was to drive the car up the ramp and drive right into the main gallery. That museum, I always went right on through the driveway that took you right

into the exhibitions. I always got a kick out of that.

MASON: We really didn't talk that much about the whole Central Avenue scene back then and I don't know if you want to tie that in with the Negro Art Theatre.

WILLIAMS: The theater that I worked at?

MASON: Yeah, that was in Ramón Navarro's place.

WILLIAMS: Ramón Navarro's home. It was on twenty-- I was the executive producer of that group. That was very interesting. I guess it was probably one of-- No, it wasn't the first because Clarence Muse had done a lot of things before I got there. But yes, that was an interesting project. Phoebe Brand, who was the wife of Morris Carnovsky, who played King Lear--he was the famous King Lear of our period-- Phoebe was a fine actress and knew her theater extremely well. I had worked with her a lot at the Actors Lab. I asked her to direct *Golden Boy* at this little theater at Navarro's place, and she was so delighted and Morris was so delighted because it meant she was, again, a woman directing. And that was a new thing here. He wrote me a lovely letter saying how grateful he was that I had asked her to do it. She did an excellent job. That was the first production we did. There were not many black technicians in theater out here at that time. You had to teach everything. You had to teach box office to them, everything. Everything in theater you had

to teach. So I told them that I was getting very tired of them not being able to be responsible for all phases of work in theater. And I said, "I won't insist that you take the show up the first night, but the second night you have to take it up. You have to take up the curtain, you have to stage manage, you have to do everything on your own." Well, did you come across in your [research] a young man by the name of Bernard--? His brother was a drummer with Lena Horne. What's his name? By the way, he read with me for Jack Lawson when Jack was trying to write a play for Paul Robeson. And, you know, the man is bigger than life, and very difficult to do. But we read the play one day. Anyway, that reminded me that it was the same young man who was the stage manager. And just before it was time for the show to open, he said, "Oh, Frances, I can't. I can't." A big, six-foot guy. "Oh, Frances, I can't. I can't do it." And I said, "Goddamn it, you will do it." And he saved us six minutes on that show the first night he did it. [laughter] What was his name? Bernard--?

SMITH: It will come to you.

WILLIAMS: You think so, huh? [laughter]

SMITH: After we're gone. Who was cast in *Golden Boy*?

WILLIAMS: In *Golden Boy*? Let me see. Joel Fluellen was in it. Bill-- He ended up being a member of the executive

board of Screen Actors Guild. And I had to go to a-- Bill-- He just died this year. But his agent didn't want him to appear in the little play, and it was because-- you've seen the play--of it that his whole career took a leap. A leap. As I said, he got on the board of Screen Actors Guild, he got jobs that he'd never gotten before. And then later Sammy Davis [Jr.], on the basis of this play's success, did it on Broadway, remember?

SMITH: Uh-huh.

WILLIAMS: *Golden Boy*? You don't remember. Child! [laughter] The woman that played in *Imitation of Life* out here in the picture, Juanita Moore, she was in that production. Fred [Frederick] O'Neal, I think, came out and did a part in that production. Have you heard of anyone named Leo Branton?

SMITH: Leo Branton, yes.

WILLIAMS: Well, he's the lawyer, you know, that really won the case for Angela Davis.

SMITH: Yeah.

WILLIAMS: Well, Leo we had as our lawyer at the theater. And we were sitting around because we weren't really sure we were going to be able to play there and have the public come in because it was a residential area. So we were sitting down at a meeting and Leo says, "Shoot, I think you're all crazy. You take a paper 'round to my house and

I live down the street I'd say, 'No, I don't want all these niggers.'" So when he said that, I said, "Leo, we don't need you anymore. We don't need anyone with that kind of attitude. And we will go out and get the permission from the neighbors to do our plays here." And we did. It's funny, one time we were coming-- We were very good friends, but we'd always go into this. One time I almost put him out of his own car. [laughter] I told him, "Pull over and get out, and I'll drive." [laughter] And we were talking about-- Remember when Rhodesia became Zimbabwe?

SMITH: Uh-huh.

WILLIAMS: He did the same damn thing. He said, "Those niggers better take what they're giving them; they won't get no more." "They" were Rhodesia. I said, "Damn it, you pull over and get out of this car." [laughter] Oh Lord.

SMITH: But he was one of the most active civil rights attorneys in the state.

WILLIAMS: Look at Jack Lawson, look at who he was. This man had written textbooks for Yale [University] on drama. Oh yes, a great man. [laughter] I told him off. Well, but it's amazing. I mean, in yourself you get shocked at the unfinished areas. I always say it's like putting a loaf of bread in the oven and it doesn't cook

fully.

SMITH: But Leo was black, right?

WILLIAMS: Uh-huh.

SMITH: Yeah.

WILLIAMS: Yeah, we all have it. You might think you don't, but, baby, someday you'll jump in shock. It's almost-- You just don't know how crippled-- And how you have accepted the sickness because it's always with you. Some of it you can fight and some of it you don't discern at all.

SMITH: Yeah.

WILLIAMS: I think that's true. Okay, lady. Do you want more about that?

MASON: I know you have some questions about the Actors Lab.

SMITH: Yeah, why don't I ask you about the Actors Lab and how you got involved. It was about '46 when it was started, right?

WILLIAMS: Yeah, I imagine about that time. I don't know how I got started going to the Lab. I guess I knew a few people from New York-- At the time I was living in a housing project at Fifty-fifth [Street] and-- Where did the red car run? Anyway, it was way on the east side. Even from here, I think I had to take three buses to get to the Actors Lab. I didn't have a car. I had to take

three buses. And you know how late theater people work? I've said it's usually about two or three in the morning. Oh God. They were doing a play and they gave me a part in it. And when I started I had about a page and a half of work in it. When it finished, I walked in the door and said, "Good evening," and walked out again. I mean, that's just what it amounted to, and to think I'm taking three buses every night in the week to get there and back. That's how insensitive people can be. And you know who was directing it?

SMITH: Who?

WILLIAMS: Julian D'Arcy. You know who he was?

SMITH: Oh yeah.

WILLIAMS: Can you imagine that?

SMITH: Did you take any--? Did you do any of the workshops at the Actors Lab?

WILLIAMS: Oh yeah, I used to do lights, I did costumes. But there were not many parts, you see. They weren't right enough to put you in a part that you could do.

SMITH: Were there people at that time who were thinking in terms of, "We'll just cast the parts with the best actor and not worry about the race"?

WILLIAMS: Oh no, that came way later. Way later. And we had a big fight with casting agents here about that. Because I went all through that *Amos 'n' Andy* period, and

oh, it was awful. The casting agent, Mrs. Burke, would call me up and say, "Frances, I know you don't want this, but you've got to help me. Somebody's going to take this part." That's the way they addressed me for parts in Hollywood.

SMITH: In terms of the acting, did you go to the Actors Lab to--? Did you study the, quote, unquote, "method"?

WILLIAMS: Oh, all of it, yeah. Then you see, I went to Russia. I went to the Soviet [Union] and studied so I could really get the whole thing. And it was very interesting.

SMITH: The other thing I wanted to ask you about in terms of your acting career was your part in [A] *Raisin in the Sun*. You played the grandmother and--?

WILLIAMS: Oh, yeah. I flew out from Los Angeles. This is funny. I was taking a course about dreams or something, you know. This wonderful professor was here, and I was taking his course, and I had this dream about houses, all different colors. They were beautiful. And isn't it funny, I was then pulling out the cupboards and doing the kitchen over. And I told him this, and he said, "You're leaving town in two weeks." I said, "You're full of hops. It's impossible for me to leave." And my brother was coming out to live with me for the first time. Do you know, in two weeks I was in New York on Broadway

doing the lead in *A Raisin in the Sun*? It was almost impossible to believe that it would happen.

SMITH: Did you replace Claudia McNeil?

WILLIAMS: Yes, Claudia wanted me to. Claudia came out to do the picture, and they had to have an immediate replacement.

SMITH: So you had no rehearsal time for this?

WILLIAMS: Very little, very little. And I sneaked time off one afternoon, while we were rehearsing. I had a lot of interesting things happen in that. I took time out one afternoon and went up to the Apollo Theatre [New York] because Odetta was playing there. I had helped start Odetta here, you know, got her clothes, and oh, everything. Pearl Primus I did that with in New York. I used to go down with her-- The pushcarts on Second Avenue had everything from all the theaters in New York and Europe and everything. That's how I dressed Pearl Primus. Did I even tell you about Katherine Dunham out here?

SMITH: A little bit. How did the way you approached the role differ from Claudia McNeil's characterization?

WILLIAMS: Well, Claudia was very strong and had lots of energy, but she'd still look like a man with a wig on, you know. I mean, she's that kind of woman. And a very ugly disposition. I've never seen anyone as cruel as that woman could be. I mean really cruel. One time she was

rehearsing a play on Broadway. What was it? Something about a shawl? And she walked out on the stage and said, "I'm not going to do that. I'm walking out." And the director said, "And please don't come back." [laughter] So you know, that reveals a pretty rough kind of person. She could be cruel. Bobby Hooks, you know Bobby Hooks?

MASON: Of the NAACP [National Association for the Advancement of Colored People]?

WILLIAMS: He helped organize the theater in New York. What was the black theater in the Village [Greenwich Village]? [Ed] Bullins and all those people?

SMITH: I must know it, but it's not coming to me.

WILLIAMS: You must know, it was with Bobby Hooks. Every time I say something so many things come up. But Bobby's mother was very ill, and he lived out of New York. The telephone was in the lobby backstage, and her room was off of the lobby. He was calling to see how his mother was, and she came out of her room and cursed him out, "Making all that noise," while she was getting ready to go on stage. And one summer, I think, or winter I understudied her.

TAPE NUMBER: VII, SIDE TWO

FEBRUARY 24, 1993

WILLIAMS: Backstage when people came to see her, she was not gracious at all. "Don't touch my coat! Get!" I mean that kind of thing. She was cruel. I mean, I'd say if it's raining, "Come in," and have them come in, don't let them stay out in the rain. She'd say, "Get out of my way!" She treated people like they were cattle. She was a strange woman, just a sick woman. She liked me, but my brother [William Williams] played a wonderful trick on her. The company came out here and she said she wanted to get-- What are two quarts of champagne?

MASON: Oh, a magnum.

WILLIAMS: A magnum. I think she'd just learned the word "magnum," or they just started making that size. And she said, "Oh, Bill, I'd like to get champagne for the company, so would you get me a magnum of champagne?" And Bill said, "Yeah." So she gave him \$20 or something. That night or the night after he came to pick me up and she said, "By the way, Bill, where's my change?" And Bill says, "Oh, I'll see that you get it." It was seventeen cents, and he sent it to her airmail special delivery. [laughter] And she loved him. He was the only person I ever saw Claudia really fond of. We worked very well

together. I think I can work with anybody. She gave me beautiful jewelry and a lot of lovely things.

SMITH: You know, one of the main themes of that play is the question of abortion.

WILLIAMS: Yes, with the young people.

SMITH: With the young people. That's a major theme--

WILLIAMS: Yes.

SMITH: --in the play.

WILLIAMS: Oh no, it wasn't the major theme.

SMITH: It's not the major, but it's a major--

WILLIAMS: Yes. It was an important one.

SMITH: Because of the relationship-- The daughter is pregnant--

WILLIAMS: Yes.

SMITH: --and is considering--

WILLIAMS: Diana Sands, remember?

SMITH: --having an abortion, which was illegal at the time.

WILLIAMS: Yes, at the time.

SMITH: And it got me thinking, in the black community, in the African American community, in the 1950s, what was the attitude towards abortion?

WILLIAMS: They didn't like that at all. That was said in the play.

SMITH: Uh-huh.

WILLIAMS: What did she do? There was something else that came to my mind. There was so much of that. But working with Lloyd Richards-- When I first came to New York to read for that, I had been working in Hollywood so long, and I had been a nothing for so long, directors didn't even see you. I did my first thing in Hollywood and I told you that I cried because I couldn't--

SMITH: Yes.

WILLIAMS: Yeah. I had to improvise in five places at one time because at the same moment I was in five different places, and they had to redo it because all the actors wanted to work with me. There was Burgess Meredith, Ginger Rogers, I think Peggy Woods. That was a good group. David Niven. I was working with all of them at the same "twelve o'clock at noon today."

SMITH: But with Lloyd Richards it was--

WILLIAMS: Yes. The sensitivity of this man, his ability to know you mattered and that he had confidence that you could do it. I tell you I could hardly work for tears. I had forgotten I was a human being as an actress working in Hollywood. I don't know how people got so insensitive. I just don't know. I don't know how they could live and not respect the dignity of other people to the degree that they did. I really don't. But yes, working with Lloyd

Richards was a whole new breath of air to me. And I enjoyed it very much. I had some lovely, lovely things said and written to me doing that play. In fact-- Oh, it's too much, it's just too much to talk about. Rest a minute, can't you?

SMITH: Sure. [tape recorder off.]

WILLIAMS: There were two young men, one was from Holland and the other was from Denmark. I had known them out here through friends. It makes me furious not to be able to remember names, but they were very fine, and the difference in these men was amazing. At Christmastime once while they were here in town, my brother was coming out from Cincinnati to spend Christmas with me. And suddenly he couldn't come; business was going and he couldn't leave. It was a real disappointment, and when-- Freddy Allbeck was his name. They were supposed to spend Christmas with the ambassador from his country that year; this was all planned. When he heard that my brother couldn't come out, he said, "You shan't be alone." And both of those guys came down and spent the whole holiday with me. Oh, it was fun. We had such a good time. We had a big barbecue outdoors, we sat in the grass, and this place was really quite pretty then. We had such a good time. Later, I've seen them and been with them in Europe.

Oh, I know why I told this. When I got ready to go in, one of the men who was in charge of the theater said, "Miss Williams, there are a couple of young men that have been wanting to see you. They come every day, several times a day, and I don't know what to tell them. Would you tell me what to say?" I didn't know who they were. It was Freddy and this young friend of his. And do you know what they did? They didn't want me to go into a dressing room that Claudia had been in. They worked with materials and stuff. One guy made shirts, and the other one was an actor, and he'd done a lot of television stuff here. He worked with George-- Small man, comedian, who was on television. Well anyway, these two guys did that whole room over. They upholstered the furniture, they put in all new drapes, and I don't remember what they did about the rug, but the whole room was gorgeous when they got through with it. But you know, for two young men to insist that they get in to get that room ready before I opened on Broadway, that was really sweet, just really sweet.

SMITH: Did you work with Sidney Poitier? Was he still in that--?

WILLIAMS: No, he left. He had to be in the picture too.

SMITH: Right.

WILLIAMS: The son of a gun picked me up and said, "This

is the greatest actress we have," and swung me around. It took years before I could even get that much in a picture that he did. [laughter] Here we go.

SMITH: Yeah.

MASON: Is there time to ask about Brecht?

SMITH: Oh, sure.

MASON: Okay. Well, you mentioned that you knew Bertolt Brecht when he was out here, and I don't know how that fits into your whole story, but--

WILLIAMS: Well, that of course came out of working at the Actors Lab. Many of them like Mordecai Gorelik, Mary Tarcai, the man I just told you about, and Phoebe and Morris were all very good friends of his. We had lots of very nice sessions together. We ate a lot together, and talked a lot about theater and what was important. I always remember him saying, "These people come out in anguish. They all look like they need to go to the toilet. And they think that's making a statement. It is, but not the one they think they're making." I have a chair very much like that [gestures] in Mexico at my place that belonged to Brecht, that he left to me when he left here. Then when I was in East Germany one year, the [Berliner] Ensemble there-- He had died, but his wife [Helene Weigel] wrote me a letter and said any time that I had free I was welcome to come over to the theater there,

and I did enjoy it. I learned lots of things. Beautiful.

SMITH: Yeah, they did good work.

WILLIAMS: Oh, did they. It was beautiful. Well, they had time and money. We don't have it.

SMITH: I had also wanted to ask you about your involvement with *Salt of the Earth* and Independent Production Company [IPC].

WILLIAMS: I'm writing that sort of in detail in my book.

SMITH: Oh, you are, okay.

WILLIAMS: Because I think there's a whole side of it that they have never said anything about.

MASON: You're mentioned in a book called *Salt of the Earth* that's like half sort of remembrances by [Herbert] Biberman and half commentary by a woman named Deborah [Silverton] Rosenfelt. She sort of reconstructs all the problems and things with the film, and she mentions you. She says that when she went to talk to the women in New Mexico, they said specifically, "Please mention Frances Williams because she always gets left out." She was saying that you meant so much to the women there that your name kept coming up.

WILLIAMS: That's interesting. I've never heard of that, but I'd like to--

MASON: I can bring you the book the next time.

WILLIAMS: I'd like to see it.

SMITH: Virginia Giaconde had told me that you knew the real story.

WILLIAMS: Oh, no. Really?

SMITH: Uh-huh.

WILLIAMS: Virginia Giaconde did?

SMITH: Uh-huh.

WILLIAMS: That's very interesting. I had a room at the head of the stairs that came up to the second floor, and I heard her, Biberman, and Paul Jarrico coming up. Biberman said, "I'm sick. I couldn't sleep all night. That woman's driving me crazy." [laughter]

SMITH: Meaning you.

WILLIAMS: Meaning me. Paul says, "Well, I think it will be all right." He was a strange fool, he was an arrogant fool. Good director. Did I ever tell you what he did to Billie? Billie Holiday was in New York. Oh, you know, she was a nightclub singer. And Herb wanted her in a picture. He went to New York to get Billie Holiday to be in this picture. And Billie Holiday said, "I don't need to be in a picture. I don't want to be. I don't know nothin' about picture-makin'." He went three times to New York. The third time he brought her a contract that was so attractive she felt she couldn't refuse it, but she didn't know enough about film to say, "Damn it, let me read the script." He got her tight in this contract, and

when she came out here, the part was the part of a maid. She said, "Hell, Fran, I went in to see him because I didn't want to be a maid." She said, "If I could have gotten out of that contract I would have." That's what she told me later. He was a horrible man. I would go to Hollywood to take somebody something, a basket of something-- I remember, I was going out to see Fred O'Neal, and Herb said, "Well, what are you doing out here?" [laughter] I was so taken aback that I said, "What in the hell difference does it make to you?" He was an awful man, he really was. And he was supposed to be such a good man. No, *Salt of the Earth* was something. They didn't want me to go do *Salt of the Earth*. You know, I was with this production company. Did I tell you how it was formed?

SMITH: No.

MASON: No.

WILLIAMS: Oh. Well, I was in New York, I don't know what for, and they were in town: Paul Jarrico and Herb Biberman. And someone said, "You have this production company. Do you have Frances Williams in it? She's one of the actresses from New York." And he said, "No, we don't know her." So they got us together. They invited me out to dinner, dinner that was cooked at the table-- You know, these restaurants with chicken cacciatore, and

the salads were mixed at your table. I mean, it was very damn fancy. Then they started telling me about the project they were going to do, the first film. It was about a white woman who had divorced her husband and had a child, and she fell in love with a black man and married him, and the father of the child didn't want his daughter to be in this home and-- Well, that was the situation. They were trying to write a play about this. So I'm at dinner listening to this play. And the attitude of the writer and how he handled his people and what he said was just awful. I'm eating and I thought, "Well--"

SMITH: Was Jarrico the writer for this?

WILLIAMS: He was the business manager or treasurer or something. But he and Paul-- I was assistant director, but I don't-- Paul had a-- We had a production company.

SMITH: Right.

WILLIAMS: And I think Paul was the treasurer or something. He handled all the--

SMITH: He was producer of *Salt of the Earth*.

WILLIAMS: Well, that's why-- Yes. And Herb was the director.

SMITH: Right. Was Michael Wilson the writer for this other film?

WILLIAMS: Yeah, he worked on *Salt of the Earth*--

SMITH: Right.

WILLIAMS: --and Adrian Scott, and who else? I loved Mike, oh God, what a beautiful man. Adrian Scott and Michael were the two gems in that company, they really were. But they didn't want me to go down to New Mexico because Herb said, "You know, Frances, the Mexican people are more prejudiced against blacks than we are. And they aren't-- They don't fight, they know how to docilely take things." I said, "Oh?" Would you think this of him?

MASON: That's strange.

WILLIAMS: I got to New Mexico on Saturday night and they had a gathering Sunday morning, and these Mexican Americans came to me and said, "Could you help us? These people just don't understand." This is the first Sunday that I'm there, and I don't mean one person, I mean groups. So, you know, I've got to really tell that story.

SMITH: Yeah.

WILLIAMS: It's really a story.

SMITH: You were planning on doing a film on the Scottsboro boys through that production company, weren't you?

WILLIAMS: I don't think so. No. The darling little woman who died last week, Audrey Hepburn, was going with a very fine actor. They were in love, I think. And they wanted me to do one on Carver, George Washington Carver. I don't know what happened. It got all--

SMITH: While you were involved with IPC, were you developing African American stories for the company? Were you planning on directing a film under those auspices?

WILLIAMS: I don't know what you mean.

SMITH: Were you going to do a film after they finished *Salt of the Earth*?

WILLIAMS: Oh, was I? I can't remember. [laughter] They took so much out of me I was about to have a nervous breakdown. And Adrian Scott said, "Frances, I want to talk to you." He said, "I have a very fine psychiatrist. Now, it costs \$30 a session, but I go almost every day. If you will go once a week I will pay for it." And I said, "Adrian, that's damn sweet of you, but you don't know what's the matter with you. I know what's the matter." [laughter] "So when you know what's the matter, you can face it and do something about it. And I will do something about it. But this isn't the moment."

[laughter] Oh, but he was a beautiful man, Adrian was beautiful, and Michael-- But the rest of that crowd, they were just nuts. If you don't have it, you don't have it.

SMITH: It's a good film, though, nonetheless.

WILLIAMS: Oh, it came out a very good film. I got one of the first black technicians in that film. I had to go all the way to New York to get a camera-- He was a cameraman and he did all the master shots. Hilburn, I think his

name was. He was, I guess, one of the first black technicians with the exception of the man who did sets, the architect.

MASON: Oh, Vaughn.

WILLIAMS: Vaughn, Ralph Vaughn.

SMITH: So that raises the question to me, when they had the big studio strike in '46, the Conference of Studio Unions, were you involved with that in any way?

WILLIAMS: Not really. The only way I got involved is-- I don't know what year Fred O'Neal ran for national president of Actors Equity Association. Did I say anything about that?

SMITH: You talked about that a little bit before. I don't remember the details, but you did talk about it.

WILLIAMS: But at that time I was speaking to the unions, and I told them that-- They had then the business that you had to be a member of the family in order to be in the union. And I said, you know, "Some of you are going to have to have some illegitimate children." [laughter]

SMITH: The other thing I noticed on your résumé was that you had been working on a film project on [Pablo] Neruda.

WILLIAMS: That's familiar; why can't I remember it? Neruda. Does it say any more about it?

SMITH: It was in one of your résumés that you had a film project on Pablo Neruda or one of his productions. But

maybe more generally, while you were here in Hollywood, were you trying to get films made? Were you trying to move--? Were you writing?

WILLIAMS: Well, I started the first caucus for black actors in Actors Equity out here and had workshops so that they'd know what to ask for, you know, and also what they could get. They sabotaged that too.

SMITH: Do you have any more questions on *Salt of the Earth*?

MASON: No, I didn't really have any.

SMITH: The *Salt of the Earth* story you are writing down, so--

WILLIAMS: I feel it needs to be written, just for education--

SMITH: Yeah. Another thing I wanted to ask you about was your running for office. I think it was 1948.

WILLIAMS: What can I tell you? I had so many writer friends, I thought, "Well, this will be simple. All I'll have to do is have you write a few speeches. As an actress I can certainly [laughter] read a speech." So the first writer that I approached said, "Of course, Fran, I'd love to help you. You write the speech out and I'll edit it." And I said, "Oh hell, I don't need that." So I had another friend who was an actor, and I said, "Look, I have to have speeches, and you're a writer. Will you write my

speeches for me?" He said, "I'll help you, Fran. You write them and I'll edit them." I said, "The hell with all of them." [laughter] I didn't know how to write a speech! So we-- I'll never forget the first speech I had to make. I was so sick.

SMITH: You were running for [California] State Assembly?

WILLIAMS: State assembly. I was so sick, I couldn't stand up. I crawled around the floor, around that table in the living room. I will never forget how sick I was. And yet one time during that campaign there was a very fine Jewish group, I don't know who they were. Anyway, they were a very strong organization of women, and they asked me to come and speak at their luncheon for ten minutes. And I said, "Fine, I'd love to." So I went to their luncheon, and just as I stepped in the door, this president of the organization said, "Frances, we've made more time for you, you can talk an hour." [laughter] Little things like that.

SMITH: How did you decide to run, or why did you decide to run that year?

WILLIAMS: I think that people were pushing me. I had lots of friends who wanted me to do it. And I think the man who would-- I think it also had something to do with the person who had preceded me in that job. I can't think who it was.

SMITH: Well, what section of town were you--?

WILLIAMS: Right here.

SMITH: Oh, this side, around Crenshaw--

WILLIAMS: Sixty-third--

SMITH: Sixty-third, yeah.

WILLIAMS: --Assembly District.

SMITH: Did you have a black representative already?

WILLIAMS: No, no. Gus [Augustus F.] Hawkins ran the year before that. And the other black person was a man named [Frederick] Roberts, but Gus and I were campaigning together.

SMITH: Oh, against each other?

WILLIAMS: No, no.

SMITH: Oh, for separate districts.

WILLIAMS: At the same time for different districts.

SMITH: Did you run as an Independent or a Democrat?

WILLIAMS: As an Independent. How did I run? On the Progressive ticket.

SMITH: Oh, the Progressive Party ticket.

WILLIAMS: Yeah. Oh, it was fun. I enjoyed it. It was challenging, but I did enjoy it, and I was well received. I got more votes in this district than any of the other candidates, including [Henry A.] Wallace. Remember him, Henry Wallace?

SMITH: Oh, yes.

WILLIAMS: If I had had money enough to run another year-- Then later they wanted me to run for Congress. And I just didn't have the money and the support to do it. But it would have been a different life. [laughter]

SMITH: Actually, the next thing I wanted to talk about was the little theater.

WILLIAMS: Mine?

SMITH: Your theater, yes. [Frances Williams Corner Theatre]

WILLIAMS: I was teaching drama at Dorsey High School, night school. That's funny, I must have been a very funny person, because I would get very, very militant material for my classes and take the material down to the office to have copies made of it. [laughter] And I evidently had friends in the office because I always got beautifully done material and more of it than I asked for, which made me know there was someone who was sympathetic with the direction that I wanted to go. We had this three-car garage here, and it was full of antique rocking chairs. I bet I had fifteen old rocking chairs. Anyway, we got rid of all of that stuff and cleaned it out and painted, and we got some chairs from a theater out in Hollywood that was closing up. The students and I built the whole theater.

SMITH: About what year was this? Do you recall?

WILLIAMS: About 1967, I gather. About '66, '67, yeah. When I was building it there were a lot of people-- I was on the executive board of Actors Equity, and a lot of-- Not a lot, but people came out from New York. I had a dance floor. Well, it was one level then, and it was a dance floor. You had to have certain specifications so that you had resilience and that sort of thing. So we made the floor that way so that we could have dancing if we wanted to. I remember there was one young man who was from Panama who really opened my eyes to the conditions in Panama. And then I taught a group of eighteen Native Americans so that they could have their own theater.

SMITH: Uh-huh.

WILLIAMS: And then I had a group of Asians and of course blacks.

SMITH: What was your involvement with the Inner City Cultural Center?

WILLIAMS: What about it?

SMITH: What was your involvement with the Inner City Cultural Center?

WILLIAMS: Oh my God, you don't want to do that today, do you?

SMITH: It's that big a story?

WILLIAMS: It's quite a story. It's quite a story. Al-- what was Al's name?--at UCLA, he was in charge of

humanities or-- But he came over to see me and took me over to his house and just picked my brains. And I knew Jack, I guess--

SMITH: Bernard Jackson?

WILLIAMS: Bernard Jackson. And Josie I knew. Now I'm trying to think. I'm trying to think when the little theater of Frank Salverra's got started in relationship to when the Inner City got started.

MASON: Well, the Inner City got started about '77. Does that sound right?

WILLIAMS: But I don't remember when Frank Salverra's group started working. Well, it isn't too important. Anyway, they set up this project. They had \$3 million. And they did it in a building at Washington [Boulevard] and Pico [Boulevard].

SMITH: More or less.

WILLIAMS: And it was a building that belonged to Thrifty Drug Stores. They had used it for-- I don't know. And they were doing all of this over, with new toilets and dressing rooms and stage and all sorts of things.

MASON: Was this--?

WILLIAMS: But it had been a movie [theater], so they had seats. Now, I'm trying to remember what they did. Anyway--

SMITH: And then they changed it sort of into a theater-

in-the-round, kind of.

WILLIAMS: No, no.

SMITH: No?

WILLIAMS: They didn't there; they did that at the second theater.

SMITH: Oh, okay.

WILLIAMS: No, they just had a straight-- I remember one performance there of *A Raisin in the Sun*, and I walk out on the stage-- They gave performances for schoolchildren, and they'd bus them in and do morning productions. I will never forget this morning. This play had started, and then I came on, and suddenly there was such an applause, such standing up and applauding, and I couldn't think what-- I hadn't said a word. I never could figure out why they were applauding, unless [when] I brought Mama on, I was really Mama, and they recognized it to that degree. I've never understood why there was such acclaim, you know, that time, because, as I've said, I hadn't even said a word, just walked on the stage. What other things? Anyway, they were building this, and I had another friend who was in charge of construction, a fine man. And I used to go by and we'd talk. One day we were there, and we overheard the man who was the chairman of the committee working on this project. He said-- I don't know whether you can say this or not. I never know what I should say

and what I shouldn't say.

SMITH: Well, when you go through the transcript, you can circle things--

WILLIAMS: Oh, that will help. All right. This man, this actor who was the chairman of their committee, said, "Three million dollars. That's too much money for any niggers to handle. They don't know what to do with that kind of money." Now, let me tell you what they did with it. They asked me to set up at UCLA interviews, and I set up interviews for over two hundred actors for this new setup. I got all the interviews, and you know what a workout it was getting the people, timing the interviews, all of these things, so that they meshed with two hundred people. It was a job. Do you know they didn't hire one of the people that I had set up in the interviews? They brought with that \$3 million thirty actors from New York, their wives, their husbands, their children, their dogs, and their maids. They got them houses in the [San Fernando] Valley with swimming pools. They took care of everything. They had the money with which to do it.

They didn't want me in the production. They didn't want me anywhere, even this man from UCLA who had started the whole project. I was much too militant; they didn't want me anywhere. So I said, "The hell with that, I'm going to be here somewhere." So I took wardrobe. They

didn't have anyone for wardrobe. I took wardrobe. I said, "I want to have that job because I'll be backstage and I'll know what the hell they're talking about and what's going on." [laughter] I got the whole caboodle of them fired because they had to admit what I said about them was the truth, because I used their own language, and I [hit] home.

The first thing we did was-- Our theater wasn't ready, and we had to go to another theater to do that first production. And we did it in modern dress. It will come to me, the name of the play. They had all of these corsets that you had to lace the strings and all that business and the shoes with the laces that came halfway up your leg, and I'm the wardrobe woman. All these flounces and skirts-- It was a very difficult production. And they brought a woman to do costumes, wardrobe from New York--a little girl who didn't know what the hell she was doing. And I'll never forget, instead of stitching these things on well, she basted the ruffles on these big dresses, and I had to keep them clean, you know? You take those to the cleaners, every time they came back you had to sew on the damn ruffles.

So I got tired of that. I got the director and the producer and I told them I wanted a meeting with this wardrobe woman. And they said, "All right." So we all

got together at this theater and they told me I could speak. And I did. I told her just what I told you about these costumes, and how incomplete they were, and they weren't built for endurance, and so forth, but I did it with a few good curse words, so that I was very emphatic. And pretty soon, she said, "I never, I never had anyone talk to me like this. I won't take it." And I said, "God damn it, you will take it, and you'll put these ruffles on the way they're supposed to be put on. You'll do that." The producer and the director, afterwards they said, "Frances, I'm so glad I was there. I've never seen such a production before." And I got everything I wanted.

Later, I'll never forget, they put on a Greek play. And that was difficult because if the material isn't right and it doesn't drape properly-- If it gets too cumbersome you can't move as an actor. Oh, what's the wonderful actor with the balding head? Roscoe Lee Browne. And this thing they were trying to put on him-- He just couldn't move; he couldn't get out of it. So he said, "Listen, you get this costume fixed, or I'll tell you-know-who, and I know I'll get it done." [laughter] He got his costume done the way he wanted it.

Another thing that might be interesting that happened-- Oh, there were so many things. But anyway, you see, I got backstage, I got all this mess I didn't know

about: these people coming out, all these actors, and I'd interviewed two hundred for no reason at all. I got all this business. And I had Jack bring over his secretary every night and dictated after I came home from work. And that's how we got rid of them. But what was that man's name, Gordon? I can get the names to you. But they admitted-- They were their own words, you see; it was so apparent when I dictated it. I'd never done anything like that before, but by God you can be put in a position to do almost anything. He resigned, he had to leave. The director, I remember, and his wife came to me and said, "Frances, you always do everything so beautifully. Would you be in charge of the farewell party for my husband?" [laughter] And I said, "You know, I'd be delighted." [laughter] It was a good party. In fact, it was an excellent party. [laughter] And he had to go. As I said, I used their words, you see. It was too accurate, and they couldn't ignore it. So that's how we got rid of that batch. And then, you see, Jack had not lived in the community, and Josie had not lived in the community. Anyway, his parting did me more good. It's the first time I've ever pulled anything like that.

TAPE NUMBER: VIII, SIDE ONE

FEBRUARY 24, 1993

MASON: You had talked about the initial \$3 million. Was that all from the California Arts Council?

WILLIAMS: No, no, no, no. I don't know where that fund actually came from. I don't know whether there were individuals or what. Anyway, they amassed this \$3 million to get that place started and used almost all the money in that-- They even did things like bring in metal ladders for the backstage work. Well, you know, with electricity, you don't use metal ladders backstage. That's just stupid. I mean, they did all sorts of wrong things.

MASON: So after they left, I understand that the [Inner City Cultural] Center did a lot of work with Los Angeles City College theater people, the theater academy there.

WILLIAMS: They used everyone they could get. As I said, the reason I think that it was slow starting was that Jack [Bernard Jackson] and Josie were not of the community, and they could have gotten things going-- But they did some terrific things. They did things like, when calls would come in from the studios, they'd have those kids groomed and stay there at the theater all night in sleeping bags to get them on the sets in time, so that they'd have no excuse for saying they were late for interviews or things

like that. Have you heard of Saundra Sharp?

SMITH: I've heard of the name, yeah.

WILLIAMS: Well, Saundra Sharp is a little actress, writer, dancer, singer, you name it. Now she's a filmmaker. In fact, she's just presenting one of her short films in Africa this week or last week. I had even trained her mother in Cleveland at Karamu [House], and she's up here now. She's been here for quite some time now. But she got so tired of them saying that they had no black technicians. They just didn't know any. Right there I have a little dictionary of-- She got three hundred black technicians, put them in a book, published them, took them out to studios, and made them buy them. And you know, the more I think of it, it was at that point that we got this real change in the industry. I had not thought of that before, but Saundra Sharp made them buy these books. And I know they were shocked to see three hundred black technicians able, and they didn't have any work for them. Jack has a great mind--Bernard Jackson. He's a very visionary person. He's way ahead of all of us, really. I love him very much. I don't see him much now, but if I yelled, he'd be here. He's a great, great man. I'm trying to think of some of the other things that were-- Jack was great. He was really equipped for that and worked hard at it. He traveled to get new material.

He started the first African plays, and Rosalind Cash and all that-- Those were all Jack's finds, really.

SMITH: Have you traveled to Africa?

WILLIAMS: Oh, I've been many times.

SMITH: Many times.

WILLIAMS: Not many, but at least five or six. I was in Ghana on their first independence day.

SMITH: That's right. Is that where you met Dr. [W. E. B.] DuBois?

WILLIAMS: No, no, no, no.

SMITH: No.

WILLIAMS: No. Someone called me from Philadelphia, I think yesterday. They wanted to come out and talk with me about DuBois.

SMITH: You became very close to him towards the end of his life?

WILLIAMS: Well, he lived forever. I met him at Swarthmore College. I went to Swarthmore one year, and he came out there to lecture, and I met him then. He had been traveling with Max Yergan trying to get Max's two boys in school. I'm going to put this in my book. It will be repeated. Max was the head of the YMCA [Young Men's Christian Association] in Johannesburg, South Africa. He went from school to school to get these boys in, and no school would take them because they were black.

He was just so let down that he couldn't find anyplace to send his young sons. Finally someone said, "Send them to a Quaker school. They're progressive and liberal." And he said, "Okay, that's an idea." So they went to the Quaker schools and got the same treatment. So when DuBois came to Swarthmore, which is a Quaker college, to lecture, at the end of the lecture he told this story about he and Max trying to find a place to put Max Yergan's sons. And then there was an intermission or something, and I went out in the lobby and people were saying, "Well, he shouldn't have done that here. After all, he was a guest." And they were all going on about it. And I thought, "The hell with them." After the lecture was over, I didn't know DuBois, and I was in my early twenties, and I went up on stage and said, "You don't know me, but I've enjoyed your lecture very much. I wondered, if you aren't too tired, would you like to go up to the village and have a beer with me?" [laughter] He said, "I would love to." And that's when we started our friendship.

He was a great man. He's been here many times. And of course Shirley [Graham DuBois], his last wife, and I were very good friends. One time Shirley went to Italy, and brought back a present for DuBois. When he came here one time for dinner, the first thing he said was-- He had

one foot in the door and said, "I was invited here for food. Where is it?" [laughter] You never think of him--

MASON: Yeah, I was going to say that's two revealing anecdotes there. [laughter]

WILLIAMS: "I came here for food, and where is it, Frances?" So I said, "Well, it's here." And we were sitting around the table talking, and he whispered to me, "Ask Shirley what present she brought me from Italy." So I said, "Okay." So we went on talking and talking, and I said, "Shirley, you really enjoyed your Italian trip didn't you? Tell me, what did you bring back for W. E. B.?" And she said, "Oh well, Frances, it was very difficult to get good olive oil, so I brought back two gallons." That was his present from Italy. He said, "So, Frances, anytime you come to New York you can make the salad." [laughter]

But the other thing I remember, the first time he came in this house, he said, "Yes, I'm learning a lot." He said, "I've been writing about things I really had never seen. But now I see the application, and the things that I wrote about were right." That was interesting, I thought. Then he elaborated on that and wrote on it for quite a long time about different issues, black workers, white workers-- He was a great man; you'd love him.

MASON: I do love him. He's my hero. [laughter]

WILLIAMS: Another thing I'll never forget, he loved-- He didn't like-- What can I say, and how do I say it? I'm just limited in my vocabulary. Well, he'd been with that [Harlem] Renaissance group, you know. He was sophisticated, that's all. If I bought wine for DuBois, it was a good French import. If you fed him, you fed him lobster, you know. You didn't get a hunk of beef and cook it. And you didn't cook greens and stuff like that. So this time he was going to do a lecture at Unity Church-- What do you call it? Unity Church? Isn't that the name of that church on Eighth [Street] and--

SMITH: Oh, the [First] Unitarian Church.

WILLIAMS: The Unitarian Church. He was doing this big lecture at the Unitarian Church, and they had these rooms in the back, and a hallway kind of thing that the rooms are off of, you know. I was there and I had to go backstage and I didn't want to disrupt his thinking or what he was doing in getting prepared for it. So I found myself sneaking by, and the door of the room he was studying in was open. When I looked around he was running after me, and he said, "Fran, Fran, come here. I want to tell you something." So this friend of Shirley's, I think she was a principal of a school or something and I don't know what her husband did, but they had invited them over for dinner. Shirley got hung up in a speech she had to

make, so she couldn't go with him, and the hostess was tied up in something and she was late getting there. All these things he abhorred, you know. So finally, the hosts got there and all of them got there, the husband and everyone, and Shirley arrived, and they got ready to eat. And he said, "You know what she served me? Greens and corn bread and ham." She couldn't have done worse. But I'll never forget him leaving his lecture's preparation to tell me how mad it made him spending an evening with people that would eat like that. [laughter]

MASON: A northerner.

WILLIAMS: I had a picture, I know I don't have it now, but I had a picture of them on their honeymoon. He was eighty-four, and they were on a beach, and he looked like a young man in his forties. He looked so good. One time a friend told him-- I had a first husband [George Ferguson] who wanted to remarry me. And he'd follow me when I was traveling on shows all over the country. When I arrived, he'd be there or something. So he came out here with a brand-new, custom-built Jaguar. It was beautiful, it was really beautiful. This was supposed to be my wedding present. Well, I had some friends who went to New York, and they were invited to dinner with Shirley and W. E. B. DuBois. And Shirley said, "Oh, by the way, Frances's husband gave her a Jaguar." He said, "Really?"

And they went on, and they went in the room and they ate dinner and talked. As they were leaving, they got to the door, and he said, "By the way, Shirley, what does she do with it? Is it on a leash?" [laughter] I always loved that. Oh, he was a great man; he was such a doll. I told you I always fixed baskets for friends like that and took it to the hotel with cheese and jelly and cakes and wine and fresh strawberries, you know, things that I knew they liked. With him I always got good wine and things. I may not have anything but beans in my pot, [laughter] but I stuffed those baskets full of things that he liked. I'd hit the door, and he'd say, "Shirley, this is mine!" [laughter] "Don't touch it!" He was fun.

SMITH: Well, I think actually we've probably asked you everything we were planning on asking you when we started last year. You've had a very exciting and wonderful life.

WILLIAMS: Oh, I've had-- My life is still full. Very full right now. I just did a project with the musicians union [American Federation of Musicians Local 47]. They have a very good writer named Bernard something. He's excellent at getting people to dig inside of themselves and really get it down on paper. They had all these stories from all of these writers, and then we got seven musicians to work with them to enhance their own stories. It was really a great, great night. We're going to do it

again. It was so good.

SMITH: This was at the musicians union?

WILLIAMS: My theater [Frances Williams Corner Theatre].

SMITH: Oh, your little theater.

WILLIAMS: At my theater. I did that about a week after I came-- You know, I've been in the hospital for six weeks.

The week I came out of the hospital, that's what I did.

[laughter] There was a Jamaican woman who's retired. She told a story in a Jamaican town or whatever, and the musicians would play like a reggae background, you know. It was nice, came out very well. If we do it again I'll try to let you know.

SMITH: Yeah, please. Do you have any further questions?

MASON: No. You've already mentioned that you're writing a book, and so just to kind of wrap things up, when do you think that will come out?

WILLIAMS: Hardy, hardy, har.

MASON: Oh, okay.

WILLIAMS: I don't know, it's doing pretty well. I've been asked to divide it into smaller books because it's too-- It may be a little heavy--I mean a little thick. "Heavy" may be a misunderstanding, [laughter] but I don't know. We haven't quite decided yet. I have sent it to an agent. I hope something will come of it. I think it would be something. One person asked me to do another

book while I was doing this one, so I don't know, but this one we've got about four or five hundred pages.

SMITH: Really? Are you writing it with the help of somebody or are you doing it all by yourself?

WILLIAMS: Yes, one of the writers that I had in my writers workshop. But she lives in Riverside, so we can only work weekends or when there's vacation time. But I'm enjoying it.

MASON: You'll have to get a fax machine.

WILLIAMS: Yeah. I have one. She doesn't, though.

SMITH: Do you have anything else you'd like to say to us?

WILLIAMS: Well, you stirred up a hornet's nest.

[laughter] There are many things I've said that I haven't even written yet.

INDEX

- Actors Equity Association,
 159-60, 163, 195, 196,
 199, 204-5, 256-57, 302,
 303
 Actors Lab (Los Angeles),
 281, 285-87, 295
 Allan, Lewis, 194
 Allbeck, Freddy, 293-94
All God's Chillun Got Wings
 (play), 71
 Allied Arts League (Los
 Angeles), 214-16, 270,
 280
 Anderson, Marian, 200,
 201-2
 Angelou, Maya, 278, 279-80
 Armstrong, Louis, 200
Aunt Dinah's Kitchen (New
 York City), 136

 Banks, Paul, 28-29
 Barthé, Richmond, 277-78
 Beavers, Louise, 216, 239,
 254
 Bellamy, Ralph, 196
 Bergman, Ingmar, 137
 Berliner Ensemble, 80, 295
 Biberman, Edward, 271
 Biberman, Herbert, 297-300
Blacks (play), 179
 Bledsoe, Julius, 70-72
 Bonsteel, Marian, 53-54
 Bourke-White, Margaret, 130
 Bovington, John, 109-10
 Bowron, Fletcher, 205
 Brand, Phoebe, 281, 295
 Branton, Leo, 283-85
 Brecht, Bertolt, 80, 295
 Briggs, Cyril, 33-34
 Brooks, Louise, 197-98,
 212-13
 Brown, Ann, 190
 Brown, Joe E., 255
 Browne, Roscoe Lee, 236,
 312

 Bryant, Mary, 74
 Bullins, Ed, 289
 Burke, Georgia M., 63, 71,
 72
 Burroughs, Margaret
 Taylor, 43
 Burroughs, Wilhelmina, 42,
 129-30

 Caldwell, Erskine, 130
 Calhoun, Rotha, 144-59
 Capers, Virginia, 232
 Capra, Frank, 266
 Carnovsky, Morris, 281,
 295
 Carroll, Vinette, 68
 Carter, Ben, 177
 Cash, Rosalind, 316
 Chaplin, Charlie, 266-67
 Charisse, Cyd, 182
 Cheeks, Elmer, 88
 Chekhov, Michael, 127
 Circle Theatre, 266-67
 Cosby, Bill, 229
 Cullen, Countee, 24, 56,
 57, 272-73
 Cummings, William, 33-34

 Dandridge, Dorothy, 251
 D'Arcy, Julian, 286
 Davis, Ben, 193
 Davis, Sammy, Jr., 283
 Dee, Ruby, 188
 Deeter, Jasper, 57-59
 de Lavallade, Carmen, 57
 Dismond, Geraldyn, 200-2
 DuBois, Shirley Graham,
 69-70, 317-18, 319-21
 DuBois, W.E.B., 24, 56,
 316-21
 Dunham, Katherine, 35-36,
 43

 East-West Players, 204-8
 Eisenstein, Sergei, 124

- Ellington, Duke, 200
 Ernst, Bobby, 171
- Farmer, Frances, 161-63
 Fauset, Jessie Redmon, 74
 Federal Theatre Project, 178-79
 Federal Youth Project, 178, 189
 Ferguson, George (first husband), 86, 144, 145-46, 320
 Fetchit, Stepin, 216
 Fitzhugh, Festus, 61
 Fleming, Thomas W., 9, 16-17, 19
 Fluellen, Joel, 282
 Frances Williams Corner Theatre (Los Angeles), 306-7, 321-22
Frank's Place (television series), 229-37
 Future Outlook League (Cleveland), 20-21, 89
- Gardner, Ava, 174
 Garrott, Helen, 214, 280
 Garrott, James H., 214
 Giaconde, Virginia, 297
 Gibson, Marla, 207
 Gibson, Wilfred W., 260
 Gilbert, Mercedes, 180
 Gilpin, Charles, 24, 56-57
 Gilpin Players. See Karamu House
Golden Boy (play), 281-83
 Golden, John Oliver, 122
 Goode, John, 122
 Gorelik, Mordecai, 295
 Gorky, Maxim, 122-23
 Grayson, Kathryn, 174
Green Pastures (play), 40-41, 64
- Hall, Arsenio, 32-33, 37, 38, 262
 Handy, William C., 200
 Harlem Boys Club Theatre, 185-88
 Harlem Suitcase Theatre, 219
 Harrington, James Carl "Hamtree," 170-71, 200
 Harris, Edna Mae, 222-23
 Harrison, Richard B., 40
 Hasso, Signe, 128
 Hawkins, Augustus F., 305
 Hedgerow Theatre, 58
 Hellman, Lillian, 180
 Hepburn, Audrey, 300
 Hernández, Juan, 190
 Herskovits, Melville, 82
 Herzbrun, Walter, 218, 239
 Hill, William Anthony (second husband), 208-11, 213, 214, 217, 259, 268, 274
 Holiday, Billie, 194, 297
 Hooks, Bobby, 289
 Hughes, Langston, 24, 55, 58, 64-65, 82-85, 95, 99, 100, 140-42, 176-77, 180, 226
 Hunter, Alberta, 201-2
 Hurston, Zora Neale, 82-84, 140-43
- In Abraham's Bosom* (play), 67
 Ingersoll, Robert Green, 5-6
 Ingram, Zell, 55
 Inner City Cultural Center (Los Angeles), 307-14
- Jackson, Bernard, 308, 313, 314-16
 Jarrico, Paul, 297, 298-99
 Jelliffe, Rowena, 23-24, 35, 41, 47, 48, 50-51, 64, 79, 81, 89, 90-91, 95, 139-40
 Jelliffe, Russell W., 23-24, 35, 41, 47, 48, 64, 79, 89, 90-91, 95, 139-140
 Johnson, Dorothy, 280

- Johnson, Earvin "Magic," 32-33
- Johnson, James Weldon, 200
- Johnson, J. Rosamond, 200
- Johnson, Sargent, 277
- Jones, Effie (aunt), 5
- Jones, William (father), 1-3, 6, 7
- Karamu House (Cleveland), 17, 22-24, 35, 40, 46, 48-50, 52-56, 59-62, 64-69, 72, 75-79, 80-81, 86-89, 139-40, 201; Gilpin Players, 22, 24-28; Playhouse Settlement of the Neighborhood Association, 22-23, 47-48, 52
- Kaufman, George S., 170
- Keel, Howard, 174
- Killens, John Oliver, 263
- Kornblum, Isadore B., 203, 218, 255-56
- Laberthon, Ted, 34
- Laubach, Frank C., 208
- Lawrence, Jacob, 215, 268-69, 276-77, 278, 279
- Lawson, John Howard, 273, 275-76, 282, 284
- Lawson, Sue, 273, 275-76
- Lee, Canada, 190
- Lert, Ernst, 70-71
- Levine, Irving R., 100
- Little Augie, 60-61, 69
- Little Foxes (play), 180-82
- Locke, Alain, 40, 56
- Lukens, Glen, 210, 271-72
- Lying Lips (film), 176-78, 221-27
- Magnificent Doll (film), 243-47
- Mako, Soon-Teck Oh, 207-8
- Mannerheim, Carl Gustaf Emil von, 137
- Marriott, John, 254-55
- Matthews, Miriam, 280
- McClendon, Rose, 63, 71, 72
- McDaniel, Hattie, 216, 239
- McNeil, Claudia, 288-90
- Meredith, Burgess, 292
- Meyerhold, Vsevolod, 120-21, 127-28
- Meyerhold Theatre (Moscow), 114-15, 117, 120, 121
- Micheaux, Oscar, 221-25, 227-28, 264
- Miller, Juanita, 214, 280
- Mitchell, Abbie, 180, 182, 200
- Mitchell, Pearl, 87-88
- Moore, Juanita, 283
- Moorehead, Agnes, 174
- Moscow Art Theatre, 118
- Moss, Carlton, 178, 265-66
- "Mule Bone: A Comedy of Negro Life" (unpublished play), 84-85, 140-43
- Murphy, Eddie, 38
- Muse, Clarence, 254, 281
- Natalia Satz Children's Musical Theatre (Moscow), 116-17
- National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), 24
- Native Son (play), 178-79
- Navarro, Ramón, 219
- Negro Actors Guild, 198-200
- Negro Art Theatre (Los Angeles), 219, 281
- Niven, David, 245, 246-47, 254, 292
- Now (newspaper), 33-34
- O'Brian, Christopher, 203-4
- O'Casey, Sean, 45-46, 51
- Odetta, 288
- O'Neal, Frederick, 196, 198, 283, 302

Patterson, Lloyd, 100-1,
 122, 131-32
 Patterson, Louise, 100, 111
 Patterson, Vera, 100-1,
 105, 116, 124, 132
 Patterson, William, 111-12
 Peters, Brock, 188
Piece of the Action (film),
 229
 Piscator, Erwin, 79-80,
 94-95
 Playhouse Settlement of the
 Neighborhood Association.
 See Karamu House
Plough and the Stars
 (play), 45-46, 51
 Poitier, Sidney, 229, 251,
 294-95
Porgy (play), 61, 64
 Powell, Adam Clayton, Jr.,
 160-61, 200
 Pratt, John, 43
 Price, Leontyne, 175
 Price, Vincent, 270, 271
 Primus, Pearl, 288

 Rahn, Muriel, 200
 Raikh, Zenaïda, 120
Raisin in the Sun (play),
 287-88, 291-93
 Randolph, A. Philip, 29-32,
 92, 172, 194
Rashomon (play), 204, 205-6
 Reagan, Ronald W., 252
Reckless Moment (film), 228
 Reid, Tim, 229-30, 231-32,
 235, 236
 Richards, Beah E., 279
 Richards, Lloyd, 292-93
 Richardson, Willis, 65
River Niger (film), 229
 Roberts, Frederick, 305
 Robeson, Eslanda Goode, 35-
 36, 122
 Robeson, Paul, 24, 35-36,
 44, 45, 122, 216, 250,
 273, 282
 Robinson, Bill, 191, 200,
 216-17

Rogers, Ginger, 246, 292
 Royal, Virginia, 252
 Rudd, Wayland, 102, 117,
 133-34

Saint Louis Woman. See
Little Augie
Salt of the Earth (film),
 265, 296-301
 Salverra, Frank, 308
 Sands, Diana, 291
 Satz, Natalia, 53, 116,
 122
Saunders of the River
 (film), 35-36
Scarlet Sister Mary
 (play), 27-28, 60
 Scott, Adrian, 300, 301
 Scottsboro boys, 131
 Screen Actors Guild, 251-
 52
 Searcy, Elizabeth, 175-76
 Sharp, Sandra, 315
Show Boat (film), 174-75,
 253, 255
 Singleton, John, 262
 Sissle, Ethel, 215
 Sissle, Noble, 189-90, 192
 199, 200, 215
 Smith, Ada "Bricktop," 201
 Soriano, Raphael S., 271
 Southern, Orrin, 14-15
 Spencer, Arthur, 14
 Stanislavsky, Konstantin,
 118, 127-28
 St. Denis, Ruth, 178
Stevedore (play), 46, 59-
 60, 89, 124
 Stevens, George, 171
 Stevens, Gloria, 171
 Stokes, Carl, 20, 89
 Strong, Anna Louise, 42,
 129
 Sullivan, Ed, 222-23

 Tann, Curtis, 88
 Tarcai, Mary, 295
 Thomas, Chilton, 14
 Thomas, Edna, 199, 200

Three Secrets (film), 238-42
 Thurman, Wallace, 72-74
 Toomer, Jean, 74
Toussaint L'Overture (play), 27, 179
 Townsend, Bob, 262
 Travis, Paul B., 76
 Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA), 19
 Vakhtangov Theatre (Moscow), 118-119, 121
 Vaughn, Ralph, 266, 302
 Walker, Hazel Mountain, 61-62, 79, 87
 Wallace, Henry A., 305
 Warfield, William C., 175-76
 Washington, Fredi, 200
 Waters, Ethel, 24, 56, 200, 216, 217, 250
 Weigel, Helene, 295
 Welcher, Mercedeese, 65
 Welles, Orson, 178-79
 Whipper, Leigh, 199, 218
 White, Walter, 35-36
 Williams, Ben Art, 233
 Williams, Benjamin (stepfather), 1, 8, 10-12, 18
 Williams, Elizabeth Nelson (mother), 1-8, 10-12, 14, 15, 17-19, 21, 27-28, 60, 120, 134, 193, 267
 Williams, Percy Lloyd (brother), 1, 6, 18, 193
 Williams, William (brother), 1, 6, 7, 12, 39, 290
 Wilson, Frank, 62-63
 Wilson, Hugh, 229-33, 236
 Wilson, Michael, 299-301
 Wolf, Friedrich August, 95-96, 99, 110
 Woods, Peggy, 247, 292
 Woodson, Carter G., 40
 Workers School (Cleveland), 41, 89
 Wright, Richard, 178-79
 Yergan, Max, 316-17
You Can't Take It with You (play), 159, 166, 169-72, 221

